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**TIGER STANDISH
STEPS ON IT
SYDNEY HORLER**

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. PROLOGUE	7
II. STANDISH HAS A SHOCK	12
III. THE AVENGER	19
IV. THE HOUSE AT WIMBLEDON	23
V. SONIA RECEIVES FLOWERS	29
VI. AN EXCHANGE OF COMPLIMENTS	38
VII. EXCITEMENT IN THE HAYMARKET	43
VIII. ADVENTURE OF A TAXI-DRIVER	49
IX. THE RISING FROM THE DEAD	57
X. A PIECE OF SECRET HISTORY	64
XI. THE DARTING DEATH	68
XII. BENNY THE SLEUTH	82
XIII. CUT AND THRUST	85
XIV. THE KNIFE	95
XV. "THE MOLE" BURROWS	101
XVI. A STRANGE PACT	107
XVII. GREISNER LOSES HALF AN EAR	111
XVIII. THE PROFESSOR'S LAST CARD	117
XIX. BELLAMY, IN PERSON	121
XX. THE MAN WITH THE NEW FACE	125
XXI. INTRODUCING M. LUDX	129
XXII. A SIREN-CALL FROM SOMERSET	135
XXIII. THE LADY WITH A SOFT HEART	139

TIGER STANDISH STEPS ON IT

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXIV. THE POISON-CUP	143
XXV. THE JOKER TAKES THE TRICK	151
XXVI. AN EXILE RETURNS	155
XXVII. THE BLACK SPOT	163
XXVIII. PORTRAIT OF A DICTATOR	168
XXIX. BLIND MAN'S BLUFF	172
XXX. THE MISSING CENTRE-FORWARD	178
XXXI. TOO MANY ENEMIES	183
XXXII. THE FOREIGN SECRETARY TELEPHONES	187
POSTSCRIPT	191



CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE

RICHARD THE LION (the finest half-Persian in Mayfair), roused from his well-earned sleep, sat up and looked bewilderedly at the strange scene. The man he loved best in all the world was evidently making one of his jokes again.

That had been his first impression, but now, as he continued to stare, he wondered if he had been right. He knew that his master often looked serious when he played the fool, but he could not quite understand why the man he loved next best in all the world, as well as his mistress—the third most likeable living person in his estimation—kept breaking out into frequent peals of laughter. Usually the man he loved best in all the world joined in when these other two flung their heads back and laughed; but now the louder they laughed the more serious he became.

It was all very odd.

So strange that when T.M.H.L.B., etc., turned suddenly and said:

“Well, Rascal, what do *you* think?” Richard the Lion, feeling that events were getting on top of him, gave a sudden swish of his luxuriant tail, with the result that a heavy flower-vase dislodged itself from the window-ledge—his favourite camping-out place in the sitting-room—and fell with a crash right on to his master’s foot.

“Oh, damn!” he heard the latter say—and then, deciding that this part of the house was no longer any place for a self-respecting cat, he jumped to the ground, fled across the carpeted floor, and miauwed to be let out.

Enough was enough. He was getting on; a fellow his age had to have quiet. It was essential.

After Benny Bannister had closed the door behind the animal, Tiger Standish turned to his wife.

“It’s no good, my sweet,” he said in a dolorous tone; “even the cat thinks I’m lousy!”

Sonia, looking bewitching in the new pale-pink evening frock she had bought specially for that night's Great Occasion, shook her head decisively.

"What rot," she replied with decision. "I'll bet you anything you like, old boy, that when you once get on your feet you'll forget all your nerves and make the speech of the evening! What do *you* say, Benny?" turning to the bow-legged little man dressed in chauffeur's uniform, who made up the third member of the party.

Bannister—Tiger Standish's faithful henchman for the past seven years—grinned like a benevolent gargoyle.

"Well, I've seen the guv'nor do some funny things in me time and get away with it—and, in any case, 'e can always start scrappin'!" he added, as though suddenly struck by a heaven-sent inspiration.

Sonia rewarded him with a frown.

"Benny," she said sternly, "Tiger is now a reformed character; he has left all such youthful indiscretions behind him."

For the first time since he had entered that room, wearing a dressing-gown over his stiff shirt and dress trousers, Tiger Standish looked as though all joy in life had not entirely deserted him. Turning in the direction of his servant, he winked.

This manœuvre sent Benny into such peals of laughter that Sonia became almost annoyed.

"What's the joke?" she enquired.

For reply, the man she loved crossed and put his arm round her waist.

"I just remembered a yarn Harry Storey told me at the club yesterday . . . no, my sweet, I couldn't tell even Benny, let alone you. . . . Well, what am I to do about this blasted speech?" he went on, holding up the pages of manuscript from which he had been reading, and looking at them in undisguised disgust. "Suppose I telephone old Blenkiron and tell him that I am very ill?"

His wife shook her head.

"It wouldn't wash, old boy; besides, you're not going to funk it, surely?"

"Funk it!" As though the words galled him like a

PROLOGUE

challenge, her husband angrily retorted: "It's not a question of funking it, old girl—it's a question of whether or no I shall consent to make a consuming ass of myself. Fancy me getting up in front of all those foreign blighters and talking a lot of squish!"

This time it was Sonia whose voice sounded angry.

"I thought parts of it were splendid; didn't you Benny?"

Thus appealed to, Bannister nodded.

"It's so good that if you ain't careful, you know, guv'nor, you'll find yourself in the 'Ouse of Commons before you can as much as kiss your 'and," he supplemented in his quaint tongue.

"Good God!" retorted his master; "was it as bad as that?"

"Now no more nonsense, my dear," said Sonia, rising; "if you waste any more time you'll be late—you've got just half an hour to get dressed and be at the Savoy. Away with you!" And she started to shush him to the door like a hen looking after a favourite chick.

Tiger groaned.

"Oh, well, the sooner it's over, the sooner I sleep—perhaps," he commented grimly, and giving a very, very bad imitation of Martin Harvey in *The Only Way*, he left the room.

"What about the car, Benny?" asked Mrs. Standish. "Is it ready?"

"It's waiting outside, m'lady, and once the guv'nor's in it I can get him to the Savoy in about five minutes. You know, m'lady, I wish somehow that he hadn't taken on this speechifying; did you see how pale he was just now?"

Sonia, who knew that the speaker would cheerfully have laid down his life for her husband—hadn't he risked as much on numberless occasions during the course of the grim adventures they had shared together during the past few years?—tried to reassure the anxious one.

"I'm not a bit nervous about him, really," she replied; "Tiger's on edge because it's the first time he's ever had to say more than 'Thank you' in public—but once he gets on his feet I'm sure everything will be quite all right."

"Well, I 'ope so, I'm sure!" returned the still gloomy Bannister.

The ordeal they were discussing was the banquet being given that night by the English Football Association to the team and officials of the Plemple Club—the best on the Continent—which had wound up a very successful short tour that winter by defeating an English International team by two goals to one that very afternoon.

Sir Benjamin Blenkiron, the President of the F.A., had been specially anxious for Tiger Standish—the acknowledged most brilliant centre-forward in England and, therefore, the world—to propose the toast of "The Visitors." Naturally alarmed at the prospect Standish had given an emphatic "No" to the proposal, and it was only after his great friend, the Chairman of the Swifts Football Club, had implored him to make the sacrifice, that, feeling as he put it, as though foot-and-mouth disease had suddenly stricken him, he had very reluctantly given way and reversed his decision.

So here was the situation: within a couple of hours, the man who was hating like the dickens to become a public character in the sense of opening his mouth before a lot of people, was down to appear in a very unaccustomed *rôle*. During the previous half an hour he had been rehearsing his speech, and making very heavy weather of it; if Sonia's faith in her man had not been so absolute, she might well have feared the result almost as much as Benny Bannister himself. As it was, she was calm and her usual radiant self.

"You'd better be going up to him, Benny," she now said.

"Very good, m'lady," and then the door opened to admit Matthews. Matthews was a very attractive parlourmaid; so attractive, in fact, that Benny, a confirmed bachelor, was finding his outlook on life becoming distinctly soured in consequence. Matthews worried him. The very sight of her reminded him that he was neither so young as he would have liked to be, nor so good-looking. In fact, whenever he looked at Matthews, he was inclined to think that Woman as a sex (with the exception of his mistress, of course) brought nothing but Trouble into the world.

PROLOGUE

"Yes, Matthews?" Mrs. Standish said.

"A telegram has just come, m'lady; it's for the master," was the answer.

Taking the orange envelope from the salver, Sonia looked at it speculatively. She suspected telegrams that came addressed to her husband—not through the usual cause: Tiger had never given her a moment's worry in that respect, bless him—but because whenever, as was the case now, she felt that life was in flower for her, there was always lurking at the back of her mind the dread possibility of that human ogre, Sir Harker Bellamy, Chief of Q.1. British Intelligence, sending an imperious message for her husband to launch himself on a fresh Secret Service adventure.

Was this the case now? Her heart sank at the prospect.

"I know what you're thinking, m'lady," said Benny Bannister, his dark gargoyle of a face grim-set; "you're thinking that old devil Bellamy is up to some of his tricks again; now, aren't you?"

She rallied herself.

"Even if he is, I hope that Tiger will have more sense than to listen to his nonsense," she replied. Then, after a brief struggle with herself, she handed the envelope to Bannister with the words: "You'd better take it up to him—and see that he's ready in time. I shouldn't be surprised if he isn't rehearsing that speech again before the looking-glass."

"Leave it to me, m'lady," was the answer.

When Benny entered his master's dressing-room, he found Standish fully dressed, a resplendent figure in his evening kit.

"Here's a billey-doo, guv'nor," announced his servitor.

Standish took the telegram nonchalantly, but his expression changed when he read the contents:

"Good luck this evening Stop But mind your step Stop The stairs may be slippery."

It was signed by the initial "B."
Standish whistled.

The sound was ominous to Bannister.

"You're not going to tell me, guv'nor, that Little Boy Blue is putting out any feelers again?" he asked anxiously.

For reply Standish handed the telegram to the speaker.

"Read it for yourself," he said; "then you'll know as much about it as I do."

Bannister wrinkled his forehead as he puzzled over the cryptic words.

"You're not forgettin' that you're due for a long, long rest, I 'ope, guv'nor?" he commented; "you've done jes' about as much schemozzling as I can stand lately."

"All I'm thinking about just now, my lad, is that damned speech I'm supposed to be making in a couple of hours' time . . . where's my coat?"

"Well, don't start forgettin'—that's all I say," returned the man who, by reason of his faithful service, was allowed a licence of speech that often surprised Standish's intimates.

Three minutes later, with his master and mistress behind him in the Bentley, Bannister started for the Savoy.

CHAPTER II

STANDISH HAS A SHOCK

THERE are occasions when Democracy—in spite of all the Dictators' scoffings—can show the world how a thing should be done. The banquet given by that essentially democratic body, the English Football Association, to its guests that night, was one of these occasions. There was a time when professional football was regarded in this country by a certain section of snobbish-minded people as the scourings of sport, but modern opinion is more enlightened, and many distinguished figures in the Arts Society, and even Politics, were present to give welcome and pay tribute to the Continental touring side which had done so well on English soil.

The banquet itself lived up to the company. Charles, the famous *maître d'hôtel*, had done his best—which is only another way of saying that here was a feast over which the most critical-minded of gourmets would have enthused.

When he entered the room by the side of his wife, Tiger Standish was momentarily nonplussed by the vociferous applause that greeted his arrival. The guests, players and officials alike had not forgotten the brilliant solo effort which had resulted that afternoon in the English centre-forward scoring the goal which represented the home side's only point.

"Here's a nice how-d'ye-do," he whispered to Sonia, giving a very fair impersonation of the illustrious Syd Walker, but his wife merely pinched his arm. Modest as Standish was, she knew that the tribute had warmed his heart.

But, auspicious as had been his entry, this did not suffice to prevent him from betraying marked nervousness during the course of the meal. To the distinguished statesman—a rabid soccer fan—who addressed several remarks to him, he gave only perfunctory replies.

At last, Sonia summoned up sufficient courage to ask him the reason why he was so distraught, and even she was dumbfounded when he whispered back:

"I left those damned notes at home—what the deuce shall I do now?"

"Never mind, you'll be all right," whispered Sonia; "it's all for the best."

As it happened, she was right. Her faith in her man proved to be more than justified: directly Standish rose to his feet to propose the toast of the evening, all the nervousness he had shown previously vanished as though some good fairy had waved her magic wand. Looking entirely self-possessed, Tiger evoked a quick laugh and a burst of applause by addressing the visitors as "Our good friends, the enemy," and then for the space of five minutes made so many other happy "hits"—some of them at the expense of himself—that old Dan Whinnery, the veteran sports writer on the staff of the *Daily Wire*, remarked in a very audible tone: "If Standish went in for politics, he'd inject so much

fresh air into that damned nonsense that the House of Commons would explode!"

The final words of the speech were almost drowned by a furious clapping; and Tiger sat down, conscious that he had turned what he had imagined would be irreparable defeat into outstanding victory.

"Darling, you were marvellous!" was the reward his wife gave him as, beneath the table, her hand sought his.

When the other speeches had come to an end, the party adjourned into another room to talk together over the coffee-cups, a happy innovation on the part of the hosts. Sonia—easily the prettiest woman in the room—was quickly confiscated by the team manager of the touring side who was very anxious to know if she could persuade her husband to come to Taine, the capital of his country, to play just one game with the Plemple team.

M. Jaimez rose to almost lyrical heights when he started to expatiate on the English centre-forward's abilities.

"If this were not 1940, Madame Standish," he said, fiercely gesticulating, "your husband—so gallant, so brave a fighter, so altogether English—would be a *beau sabreur* in other worlds than that of sport. But alas! Those romantic days are gone! So must he have to content himself, *n'est-ce-pas*, with performing prodigies of valour on the football field?"*

Sonia nodded her pretty head. She looked grave, but inwardly she was laughing. If only she could have told M. Jaimez some of the other things that Tiger had done during the past few years she was willing to bet that the few remaining hairs on this Continental sportsman's head would have risen in sheer astonishment.

But the man, in one sense, had been right. Tiger had been born out of his generation; he should have worn a sword instead of carrying an umbrella; he should have had lace ruffles at his wrists instead of St. James's Street shirtings; he should have led a cavalry charge instead of being the vanguard of England's soccer team.

* This novel was written in the Spring of 1938.—S. H.

"You will ask him to come, madame?" repeated M. Jaimez; "all Taine will do him honour."

"I'll do my best, M. Jaimez," she replied; "I cannot say for certain, of course—my husband has so many calls on him, you know."

The other shrugged his massive shoulders.

"But of course, madame," he replied; "I can well believe that. But if he would come—ah, madame, what joy it would give to this poor heart!" And he thumped himself in the region of his breast (left section).

Repressing a smile, Sonia looked over to the far corner where she noticed her husband was being buttonholed by a curiously-garbed elderly gentleman. As there were so many celebrities present, she put the latter down as a foreign *savant* of some kind. She observed that Tiger was listening to what this man was saying to him with an expression that appeared to be made up of equal parts of bewilderment and boredom.

If she had been nearer, she would have overheard the following conversation:

ELDERLY GENTLEMAN: May I trouble you, M. Standish?

STANDISH (*abstractedly*): Er?

ELDERLY GENTLEMAN: I should explain myself. I am the London correspondent of the principal Taine newspaper—the *Messenger*, as you would call it in English.

STANDISH (*bored*): Oh, yes.

ELDERLY GENTLEMAN: Your speech to-night, M. Standish—it was very fine.

STANDISH (*more bored*): Oh, yes.

ELDERLY GENTLEMAN: So fine that I am taking the liberty of asking you if I might have your notes?

STANDISH: I haven't any notes—I lost 'em.

ELDERLY GENTLEMAN (*in an entirely different voice*): Ach! It seems to me that you have lost something else, too.

STANDISH (*after staring hard*): You old devil!

Sir Harker Bellamy grinned like the impish ogre to whom he was often likened. This man with the grey-tinted face, who looked as though he had spent the greater part of his life living underground (hence his nickname of "The Mole"), could be a ruthless task-master—he had to be

on occasions, seeing that he controlled one of the most important departments of British Intelligence—but at other times he could behave with a schoolboyish lack of dignity.

"You got my wire?" he now asked.

Standish, who concealed an admiration that amounted almost to reverence for the man under whose direction he had brought off so many brilliant *coups* as a free-lance secret agent,* put on the manner he usually affected when meeting his superior.

"Yes, I did—and what the devil did you mean by it?" he demanded.

Sir Harker, in no way perturbed by this lack of respect, grinned impishly again.

"Shook you up a bit, I expect?"

"Don't be an ass! What *did* give me the jim-jams was having to make this speech to-night—and on top of it all I forgot my blasted notes!"

Bellamy looked suddenly serious.

"We can't talk here—too many people. Follow me."

It was only when they were standing in a distant corridor, and with no one within possible earshot, that the Chief of Q.I. spoke again.

"I had a very special reason for sending you that telegram, Tiger," he said, and now his voice matched his expression; "you may think that getting myself up in this way," pointing to his curiously-cut evening clothes, "was just a foolish masquerade. Nothing of the sort! It happens that, strange as it may seem, there are one or two people here to-night who are not very well disposed towards either of us."

"Cut out the melodrama," adjured the younger man, although he knew that Bellamy would not have said the words without sufficient reason. "This is a gathering of sportsmen."

"Quite!" returned Bellamy crisply; "and they shoot other things besides goals."

"Stop talking in parables," returned Standish; "and who's 'they'?"

To his surprise, Bellamy, instead of giving a direct answer

* See the other *Tiger Standish* novels

to this direct question, burst into a babble of almost unintelligible broken English. Familiar as he was with his superior's methods, Tiger stared incredulously at him until he noticed the very direct look in the older man's own eyes. Then he tumbled. Something was in the wind—and it was something important.

"As I have already told you, Monsieur Pomfret," he said loudly, playing up, "I should be most happy to oblige you with the notes of my speech—if I only had them! Ha, ha!"

"That was very good, my boy; you deserve top marks," observed Bellamy, now speaking in his normal voice; "I burst into that flood of meaningless words just now because a certain young man, having followed us out of the other room, was watching us very curiously."

"I see. Did he belong to 'they'?"

"He did, most emphatically! And when I tell you his name, Tiger, my boy, you will understand, I hope, that it was providential on my part that I came here in so good a disguise that even you could not penetrate it."

Standish squared his shoulders.

"Well, now, let's have the facts; I'm tired of this preamble business. Who is the slug?"

"His name is Major Vincenzo Carlimero. Yes," noticing the younger man's start of surprise, "that name is very familiar to you, isn't it? It ought to be seeing that you choked the life out of his esteemed father, a matter of a few years ago."*

"Carlimero?"

"Carlimero. In case you've lost your memory as well as your notes, I would remind you that Dr. Carlimero was a prominent member of the Rahusen organisation which used to operate here in London the said few years back."

"You needn't remind me." Tiger's tone was now sharp. "But what's his son doing here—and more particularly what is he doing at this dinner to-night?"

"As an attaché of the Caronian Government enjoying the hospitality of the Ronstadtian Embassy at the moment, he has a perfect right to be in London—that is, speaking

*See *Tiger Standish*.

diplomatically. And he is here to-night, presumably, because he received an invitation. I haven't had time yet to ascertain who sponsored him, but that will come. Meanwhile, Major Vincenzo Carlimero is after your blood, my young friend, and if he can collect a few globules of mine, in addition, he will be even more pleased."

"What's he like?"

"Dark, slim, tallish, five feet nine or so—very good-looking in a Latin way; extremely well-dressed—over-dressed, if anything—successful with the ladies, has a bitter tongue and a very good memory. Is that sufficient for the time being?"

"It's ample. And it seems I was right in calling him a slug just now—he's just the sort of blighter I would like to step on. But how do you know he's come here after me?"

"Must you ask that, Tiger?" returned Bellamy with a look of reproach; "need I tell you that all sorts of information come to me at Q.I. every day?"

Standish struck himself a slight blow with his clenched fist on the right temple.

"Excuse the scattered wits," he said apologetically; "but this is rather nasty news. I want to live a quiet life; I yearn for a little golf, atrociously as I play it—and perhaps a little fishing; now, it seems I have to go slug-hunting again. Pity. Besides, it will upset Sonia—don't you tell her anything about this, mind," he went on urgently, catching hold of the lapel of Bellamy's abominable coat and giving it a sharp tug.

"I shall be discretion itself, my boy—aren't I always?"

"*Not* always! For instance, I shouldn't be at all surprised if my little gal hadn't rumbled that the telegram I got just before coming here was from your unworthy self. She's too good a sport to poke her pretty nose into my affairs, but when you want to get into touch with me again, B., just let me have a line at the club. It would sweeten my married life. Will you remember that, please?"

Bellamy stepped into character again.

"M. Standish," he said, in the part of the London Correspondent of the *Taine Messenger*, "you are kindness

itself. I now take my leave of you with admiration, and may I add deepest thanks?"

"Go boil your head!"

And then another voice—a voice that whenever it spoke caused Tiger Standish's heart to flutter—came from over his left shoulder.

"Excuse me interrupting, but you've been an awfully long time away, my dear," said Sonia Standish; "people are asking where on earth you are."

Her husband did one of the adroit acts which he was accustomed to do when the occasion demanded.

"Allow me to introduce you to M. Pomfret, Sonia," he said; "M. Pomfret is the London Correspondent of the *Taine Messenger*—he is a distinguished foreign journalist. He has been interviewing me on behalf of his paper. M. Pomfret—my wife."

M. Pomfret bowed from the waist—and made quite a creditable job of it.

"I am charmed, madame—and I felicitate you on possessing such a celebrity for your husband. Monsieur," bowing again, "always at your service. Thank you once again for your kindness."

And, walking in a pronouncedly splay-footed fashion, the spurious London Correspondent of the *Taine Messenger*, shuffled away.

"What a funny little man!" commented Sonia. Her husband took her arm.

"A very funny little man, darling," he agreed.

CHAPTER III

THE AVENGER

MAJOR VINCENTO CARLIMERO left the Savoy Hotel with a satisfied smile playing round his somewhat unpleasantly full lips. This Caronian officer had a distinct film-starish appearance; and if a "shot" could have been taken of him

as he stepped into his car in the courtyard of the famous hotel, many a Hollywood producer would have offered him a contract on the spot. At that moment—as at several others in his life—Major Vincenzo Carlimero looked slightly larger than life; in fact, he was almost four dimensional.

As he gave his chauffeur a Wimbledon address, Carlimero felt that his conceit with himself was justified; his visit to the Savoy that night had been well repaid. He had seen the man he proposed to kill in as short a time as was possible, and the sight had given him intense satisfaction. Moreover, he had another reason for feeling pleased; the woman who had been talking to Standish and whom he had subsequently ascertained was his proposed victim's wife, was a very rapturous person. He could picture himself having quite an enjoyable time with her . . . *afterwards*.

Carlimero had arrived in London a fortnight before on two separate and distinct objectives. As the guest of the Ronstadtian Embassy, he would be fulfilling his duty as Caronian Military Attaché under the Axis, and in that capacity he would be in the position to exchange confidential information with his country's ally. That was the official side of the situation.

But there was also a personal aspect to this visit. For years he had nurtured the desire to seek out and kill the man who had murdered his father, Dr. Guiseppe Carlimero. The name of that man was the Honourable Timothy Overbury Standish, better known by the ridiculous name of "Tiger" Standish. It was his mother who had passed on to him the news that his father was dead—and, whilst soldiering in the Caronian African colony of Littoria, he had sworn not to die himself until he had killed his father's murderer.

Now the opportunity had come.

The fact that his father, Dr. Carlimero, had been a criminal in no way affected his purpose. Guiseppe Carlimero had been a genius in medical research, and it was not surprising, perhaps, that such a fine brain should have turned in later life to other activities. Not at all surprising, according to Professor Lombardo of Milan University,

who had taken the trouble to explain at some length that the difference between normality and abnormality in the case of a character like his father's was so minute that the slightest maladjustment of the workings of the brain could easily account for the change. A ruthless person himself, the Major found glory rather than dishonour in recalling his dead father's association with that other genius—the grim, ruthless enemy of society, Rahusen ("The Man with the Dead Face"). What other triumphs these two—Guiseppe Carlimero and Rahusen—might not have accomplished together had not this interfering swine, Standish, broken in on their plans?

Ever since he had arrived in London, Carlimero had collected all the available information not only about the man he proposed to kill, but about his occasional employer, Sir Harker Bellamy, C.M.G., D.S.O., the Chief of Q.1. Branch of British Intelligence. Standish must come first, of course, but after he had killed that hound of an Englishman he would turn his attention to Bellamy. For the latter was morally responsible for his father's death, inasmuch as he had put Standish on to the job. He had found ready and willing assistance at the Ronstadtian Embassy. The special staff employed there, whose principal occupation it was to co-ordinate the espionage activities of the many agents at present working in England, had been more than willing to help him. Many of these men were fanatical haters of the British—but none could equal the visitor in vehemence. If Major Vincenzo Carlimero could have had his own way unimpeded—if, for instance, he could have changed places with God for a short space of a few minutes—he would have brought down upon the whole of the British Empire such a pestilence that not a single living creature, man, woman or child, would have survived. As already stated, the Major was rather larger than life itself.

He had gone to the Savoy Hotel that evening with a dual purpose: he was pleased to accept the invitation of the charming Countess Warkwith who was fooling the stupid British to the top of her bent by pretending to be a perfervid admirer of all things English, whereas actually she was

supplying the Ronstadtian Embassy with every available scrap of military, naval and air information that she could glean as a result of her assiduous society entertaining. The Countess Warkwith, whose husband was high in the esteem of Herr Kuhnreich, the Dictator of the country she secretly served, was not averse to a little gallant dalliance by way of relieving her more serious duties; and it was in consequence of her bright smiles in his direction that Major Vincento Carlimero had gone to dine with her *à deux* at her suite at Savoy Court that night.

He would have gone in any case; but he went with all the more ardour because of reading in the morning papers earlier in the day about the Football Association's banquet at which the man he had sworn to kill was to be a principal adornment.

Major Vincento Carlimero had done many things in his life—but he had never played football. This was one reason, perhaps, why his unpleasantly full lips had curled in disdain when he had perused those articles in that morning's newspaper. How could a man like himself—a soldier, a Fascist, a hater of the mob—be expected to treat with respect an enemy who indulged in such a ridiculous sport as football? As he had smoked his cigarette, Carlimero had thought of Signor Crispi, so often referred to in the British Press as "The Mouthpiece of Signor Brassiano," the Dictator of Caronia, whose sarcastic invective at the expense of the British had so often (to the amazed and furious rage of Signor Crispi himself) been hailed with hilarious delight by the very persons against whom it had been directed! Signor Crispi, having no sense of humour himself, resented its possession by other people.

Carlimero had determined to use this opportunity to get a close view of the man he was determined to kill, and so it was that, excusing himself to the Countess on the pretext that he had to meet an important member of his own Embassy in another part of the hotel, he had left the private suite and had gone down to the banqueting-room. Amidst that great crowd, no notice had been taken of him; and it was an easy matter to get the person who was such a celebrity pointed out.

But who was the funny little elderly man with whom he had seen Standish in such close conversation in one of the corridors? Well, it didn't matter. It couldn't be anyone of any importance—probably a newspaper reporter of some kind.

But the woman who had come out to speak to Standish! She was breath-taking. Fresh as he was from the inviting smiles of the Countess Warkwith, Carlimero had felt his heart thumping wildly as he looked upon the beauty of his enemy's wife.

By the time he had come to the end of his reflections the car had driven him through a wide gateway overlooking Wimbledon Common.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOUSE AT WIMBLEDON

THE other residents in Parkside, Wimbledon, were very proud of having as a neighbour that eminent Egyptologist, Professor Edmund Lablonde. For the latter, to every outward aspect at least, was a most desirable person. He was evidently wealthy—otherwise, how could he have lived in such a massive mansion as Fairlawns? He was world-famous—his excavations of the many tombs in the Valley of Kings had received the attention of the world's Press years before—and he was also known as the author of several monumental works on the Pharaohs. Being very old, the Professor was not often seen in the outside world; but those who were sufficiently inquisitive could watch him walking in the spacious grounds of his impressive home. A few—a very few—had been admitted to the privilege of his friendship. These, after a visit to Fairlawns, had dilated on the magnificence of the house and its rich, curious, if somewhat bizarre, furnishings. They reported that the mansion must be one of the finest and most valuable repositories of Egyptian antiques in the world. It contained cases of

mummies, sacred cats, ditto hawks and a vast amount of jewellery of Ancient Egypt—even a chariot which the possessor had told them had once been used by Amenemhet III himself.

Amongst the few privileged to meet the Professor, had been the Forsyths, father and daughter. Arthur Forsyth, a retired British Consular-General, had declared himself to be tremendously impressed after a visit to Fairlawns, and had talked at great length about the honour that had been paid them; but Barbara, his twenty-two-year-old daughter had taken another view.

"In spite of all you say, Daddy," she said determinedly, "I feel that there is something very queer about the Professor."

"Queer?" repeated her father, giving one of his famous impersonations of a British Consular-General (Retd.). "You don't know what you are saying, my child! You're being nonsensical."

But Barbara stuck to her guns.

"All right, have it your own way," she said; "but I'm entitled to my opinion and I'm going to express it; I don't think the Professor is a nice old man at all; with his brown skin, funny eyes and goat's beard, I think he's horrible. Yes, Daddy, *horrible*! If ever I saw a sinister person it is him!" forgetting her grammar in the heat of the moment.

The argument went on far into the night. Arthur Forsyth became very angry, but Barbara, for all her affection for him, could not help wondering once again if British Consular-Generals were not appointed mainly on account of pig-headed stupidity. In spite of all her father had said to the contrary, she had gone to bed that night feeling convinced that Professor Lablonde was actually far from being the harmless, if slightly eccentric, celebrity her father had declared him to be.

And when she had looked out over the grounds of Fairlawns, and had seen a lighted room at the end of the huge garden, she had shuddered. The memory of Professor Lablonde's eyes as he had looked at her in parting had induced a fresh feeling of instinctive horror.

Barbara Forsyth's fears would have received ample substantiation—at least, in her personal opinion—could she have been present at the strange scene which was being enacted behind the now closely-shuttered windows of the room in question.

It was a huge apartment, measuring something like forty-five feet by thirty, and highly curiously decorated. For example, the entire wall space was draped in heavy gold, whilst at a long table set in the centre of the room twelve men all dressed in fantastic costume, Egyptian in character, sat.

As each man wore over his face a mask that gave him the appearance of a hawk, any stranger who had succeeded in passing the closely-guarded entrances might have considered that he was watching a proceeding taken bodily out of some preposterous tale of penny-blood adventure. For, apart from the drapings of the room, and the face-masks, there was a good deal of other abracadabra paraphernalia. The illumination of this room was very dim, owing to the fact that it was lit only by dully-burning candles, placed at irregular intervals on the long table.

The table itself was garnished with equally curious impedimenta; there was, for instance, a human skull, the eyeholes of which having been previously treated with a special preparation of phosphorous, gave forth a gleam of bluish, unearthly light; impressively tall brass candlesticks were placed before the man presiding and on the other side of these were other macabre exhibits in the form of the mummy of an Egyptian child, said to be one of the daughters of the heretic king Akhanaton of the XVIII Dynasty, and two bowls of blood-red flowers whose exotic scent mingled with that of the burning incense, which gushed forth from a censer in one corner of this strange apartment.

Yes, Barbara Forsyth would certainly have received confirmation of her uneasy feelings concerning Professor Lablonde when, speaking from the chair which had been placed on a kind of dais above the rest of the company, a voice that she would instantly have recognised as belonging to the man she distrusted began to address the meeting.

"To you, the Sons of Anubis," he declared in his reedy voice, "I once again bid welcome! We, who reverence the Jackal-headed God, who, countless centuries ago, introduced the souls of the dead before the Judgment Seat of Ra, the Sun God and the highest God of Egypt, have met here again to-night to consider how best we can promote first our own legitimate strivings to make our beloved Egypt once again the greatest Empire on earth, and also to circumvent the evil designs of our deadly enemy, Britain!"

Hissing the last word, the speaker waited for the applause which he felt confident would follow.

Nor was he disappointed. The men wearing the hawk face-masks gave a very spirited response: they jumped to their feet, shook their fists in the air and emitted various cries indicative of anger, passion, contempt and general hostility.

It was all very stupid, but, as he listened, Professor Lablonde shook as though he had been attacked by an ague. Crazy as a coot, a direct result of a series of sun-strokes whilst working at his excavations in the Valley of Kings, he was devoting his immense wealth—he was several times a millionaire as a result of having married in middle age the widow of a Pittsburg steel baron—and energy to four specific objects. The first of these was to recreate the Empire of Ancient Egypt; the second was to return all sacred things, arts and treasures to that country; the third was to slay all the vandals (apart from himself, of course) who had rifled the tombs of Egypt's Royal dead; and the fourth was to be crowned as a modern Pharaoh.

The present world is such a howling bedlam it was perhaps not surprising that these manias had been seized upon by various unscrupulous people to further their own nefarious ends. Word had gone underground to the Ronstadtian Intelligence concerning Professor Lablonde, and word had come back—again underground—to London to make use of this madman in the best way that was possible.

The head of the Ronstadtian Secret Service in London was a very acute-minded person, and he had made good use of his opportunity. Not only was he able to use the man-

sion bordering on Wimbledon Common as a headquarters and meeting-place for his various agents, but, playing up to the old man's personal obsession for desiring to become a modern Pharaoh, he had induced Lablonde to hand over huge sums of money which, ostensibly for the use of the Sons of Anubis, were actually devoted to financing the agents who worked under his control. It was a very ingenious scheme, and Karl Greisner often smiled in his furtive way when he thought about it.

It was through the Ronstadtian Embassy in London that Major Vincenzo Carlimero had himself got into touch with the crazy Professor; and, in turn, it was as a result of this acquaintanceship that he now was sitting in the place of honour on the right-hand side of Lablonde. He was determined to make the most of his opportunity that night.

Consequently, when he rose to support the fevered remarks of the old lunatic, already gibbering with sinister anticipatory joy, he decided to kill two birds with one stone.

"To-night, Most Holy One," he said, giving Professor Lablonde the title which pleased him most, "as a result of my investigations, I have discovered who are the principal enemies we must destroy before you can be crowned Pharaoh of all Egypt!"

"Tell me their names," cried Lablonde.

Carlimero looked round the room; he wanted every word he was about to say to be heard distinctly.

"Their names are Standish and Bellamy—the first is a wealthy young fool who squanders money and time playing the ridiculous game of football, and the latter is Sir Harker Bellamy, one of the Chiefs of British Intelligence. You may wonder at such an association, Most Holy One; you may wonder what harm such a man as Standish, a gilded idler, can do to us—but you will not wonder when I tell you that beneath his pose of being merely a wealthy young sportsman, Standish is actually a desperate reactionary. Moreover, he is in league with all our enemies; he would aspire to be their leader—and thus he must be destroyed!"

"Yes, he must be destroyed!" cried the fanatic, who had

sucked in this nonsensical rigmarole as though each word was of vital importance.

"Will you leave the task to me, Most Holy One?" now asked Carlimero.

"Yes—but I must see him suffer. You will promise me that?"

"Yes, I will promise you that, Most Holy One."

The ridiculous proceedings might have gone on a little further had not Lablonde suddenly pitched forward in his seat, the victim of one of his habitual heart attacks.

As the old man's head was seen to fall forward, a burst of coarse laughter went up.

"Damned old fool!" commented Carlimero, and taking advantage of the situation gave a secret sign to two men near him.

When the three of them were alone in a smaller room of the mansion—with the door locked behind them—the Caronian became more confidential. This was not surprising when it is stated that both of these men, whose names were Seltzmann and Platz, were members of the Ronstadtian Secret Police—that formidable espionage organisation centred on London. Amongst the numerous activities of this group was the task of spying upon those men and women who had been fortunate enough to escape from the insupportable terrors of their homeland, and had sought refuge in Britain.

Platz, a man of fifty with grizzled grey hair and a scar on his left cheek, was the first to speak.

"Have they at the Embassy, told you when we may expect Rahusen?" he asked sharply. Platz, one of the Old Guard, and a veteran of the last war, had no love for Caronians generally and more particularly for this specimen, but he had to obey orders—and his immediate orders had been to place both Seltzmann and himself under the direction of this dandified young pup.

Carlimerro looked at his enquirer sharply.

"Rahusen will be here soon—that must suffice for the moment," he replied. "And once Rahusen is in London we can finish with this old idiot, Lablonde. A bullet will soon do that job. He has outlived his usefulness—

apart, of course, from his money, all of which will soon be ours.

"But meanwhile Standish, and after him the man Bellamy—these are the immediate tasks."

The two men to whom he spoke both gave him the Ronstadtian national salute, and went their way.

CHAPTER V

SONIA RECEIVES FLOWERS

THE morning was bright for December, and Tiger, waking full of zest as usual, not only sang in his bath, but intimated at breakfast that a little gentle exercise was indicated.

"Where will you go—Sunningdale?" Sonia asked, as she poured out his first cup of coffee.

He shook his head.

"If you have any love left for me, my sweet, never mention golf again," was his reply; "I went round Ashridge on Tuesday in ninety-four!"

"What is it going to be, then—squash?" came back Sonia. Again he shook his head.

"Just a walk through the park, I think," and as she looked at him with a flicker of a smile on her lovely lips, "don't forget that Joe Coyne, the actor, used to keep himself slim, fit and virtuous by walking ten miles every morning through the park, and jumping over fences on the way!"

Sonia stopped in the act of putting sugar into her own cup.

"You're still not a very good liar, Tiger," she remarked quietly.

"Heart of Jade, how you wound me!" he complained; "in fact, you wound me so deeply that I shouldn't be surprised to see drops of my blood splash into this coffee."

"Don't play the fool!" she said more decisively. "Something happened at the Savoy last night and I was hoping that you would tell me all about it. But apparently, I'm not to receive your confidence."

Tiger, in order to gain time, began to bluster—after the manner of the embarrassed male.

“Sonia, my sweet,” he cried, “don’t get silly notions into that pretty head of yours! Nothing happened at the Savoy last night—at least, nothing that was of any importance. And surely I can indulge in a little gentle loping without you thinking that another national crisis has arisen?”

He wanted to tell her the truth, badly—but how could he when he knew very well that the knowledge would cause her to grieve?

“Oh well, go for your walk, then,” she replied—and devoted herself exclusively after that to her breakfast, which did not seem to interest her, and her letters which appeared to interest her a very great deal.

An hour later, feeling very much like a disgraced school-boy, Tiger could have been seen swinging through the park at a good five miles per hour. If it hadn’t been for the little unpleasantness at the breakfast-table that morning, he would have felt that life was good and very much in earnest: here he was, a badly-threatened man, with an enemy who had sworn to take his life ready to hand—what more could any fellow expect from existence?

He was musing on this delectable situation when a man rose from a chair and pushed out a thoroughly disreputable bowler hat.

“Beg pardon, sir,” he remarked in a whine, “but could you spare a copper for a cup of tea?”

Standish had good eyes, and, moreover, there was something about this mendicant that didn’t quite ring true.

“Whisky, you mean,” he commented curtly—and walked on.

He thought little more of the occurrence until, having reached Hyde Park Corner, and feeling that there was still plenty of time before he went by a roundabout route to see Bellamy, he set off at right-angles. There were only a few people using the Row that morning, but one of these—an elderly man—didn’t appear to be very successful in managing his mount. At any rate, as Tiger continued to walk in

the direction of the Serpentine, the horse, which he had noticed behaving badly before, now started to bolt—and it came directly at him as though its rider was leading a cavalry charge!

The thing happened so quickly that Standish, who had been thinking about the best means of making it up with the wife he loved—should he send her flowers?—was taken unprepared; and if he had been slower witted he would undoubtedly have been badly injured; as it was, obeying an instinctive prompting, he flung himself flat on the ground—and heard the horse's hooves thunder over him.

Uninjured, but somewhat shaken, he got quickly to his feet. His brain was busy. Was this the first attempt on his life? Was Hyde Park that morning full of Carlimero's spies? Was the whining beggar one of these—and the unruly horseman his coadjutor? It certainly looked like it.

He looked round for the mounted man—but saw only his back: the inexperienced equestrian was galloping towards Hyde Park Corner at a pace that drew everyone's eye to him.

The fellow, having failed in his attempt, was eager to be off! So much was certain.

By this time a small crowd had gathered round Standish and were expressing both their astonishment and their indignation.

Was he hurt? That was the main burden of their enquiry. Reassured on this point, they still kept close to him, as though anxious to express their further sympathy; but Tiger, realising that amongst the mob might be yet another Carlimero agent, cut short the further proceedings by walking away. He did not think it necessary to try to overtake the horseman; besides, what good could he do? The fellow would be full of apologies, no doubt, putting it down to an unfortunate accident and—well, he was content to wait. Having failed this time, the Enemy would try again without any doubt; and at the second attempt, he hoped to bag a bird.

Sir Harker Bellamy lit the short, black pipe he had just filled with plug tobacco, and blew out a cloud of smoke.

TIGER STANDISH STEPS ON IT

"They've started early, my boy," he said by way of comment: "that is all I need to remark at the moment."

"All the same, I should rather like to have a word with friend Carlimero about it," was the reply.

Bellamy put up a restraining hand; his expression was pained.

"The impetuosity of youth, again!" he groaned reproachfully; "how often have I to tell you, Tiger, that in this game one needs to exercise patience? To rush along to the fellow now would be to show him that you have been put on your guard. Far better let him think that you imagined it was a kind of accident. Besides, there might be international complications if you went to the Ronstadtian Embassy, where he is staying, with tension at its present point. He would complain to the Ronstadtian people, and they, in turn, would complain to the F.O. Then Hell might be raised all round."

Standish fidgeted.

"It's all very well, you old buzzard, talking like that," he retorted, "but I seem to remember that whenever anything of the sort has happened to you personally, you have immediately got as busy as a one-armed paper-hanger with the itch. However," yawning, "I'll put a stopper on my ardour, and wait on further events."

"You'll be very wise—especially as Carlimero never moves out without a bodyguard of four thugs. Exactly why did you come along to see me this morning, my boy?" he broke off to ask.

"Well, after what you told me last night I felt that a little action was necessary. I don't fancy posing as a sitting partridge, just waiting to be popped off. I came to enquire if you had any more information about Carlimero than you told me last night."

"The thing we have to do, Tiger," replied the old Intelligence Chief, puffing at his pipe, "is to try to find out if Carlimero has a G.H.Q. of some kind. Of course, all his actual plans are arranged at the Ronstadtian Embassy, but, if he is the true son of his father, as I expect him to be, he will have a private hide-away of his own. That kind of rat always has his private hole. . . . Oh, by the way, I can't

help feeling in my bones that his arrival in London must coincide sooner or later with a return to active life of Rahusen. I remember, of course, that he got away by a miracle after that show at Stanbury* and that no trace of him has been seen in this country since; I know, moreover, that he could not have slipped back by any ordinary means—air or boat—because all the ports have been closely watched. But with a swine like that anything is possible.”

Rahusen! Tiger had got up from his seat and begun to walk up and down the room with the purposeful stride that his Chief knew so well. “That makes this present spot of bother even more interesting! Well, you old devil, I’ll be pushing along—you know where to find me if I’m wanted; but as I told you last night, for God’s sake don’t send any more messages home: ring up the Junior Corinthian; I lunch there almost every day.”

As the door closed behind the speaker, Bellamy chuckled. He need not have worried about his favourite agent being keen.

Sonia was sad. She had had sufficient experience to know that her husband was about to be jolted out of his ordinary life once again, and be pitchforked into another of his desperate adventures. He had shown all the signs at breakfast—a light-hearted zest in life, the not-too-clever prevarications in answer to her direct questions, the expression on his face when he had kissed her good-bye.

In her anxiety she resorted to the man who on such occasions became her confidant.

“Tell Bannister I should like to see him,” she said to the maid after retiring to her own private sitting-room.

“Yes, m’lady.”

The man who, after a brilliant career as a professional footballer, had become Tiger Standish’s Sancho Panza, came into the room looking worried. Sonia knew why he had that expression; it was because he was anxious on her behalf. She had had too much evidence in the past of how

* See *Tiger Standish Takes the Field*.

sincerely he was devoted not only to his master's interests, but to her own, to have any doubts on this point.

"Yes, m'lady," Benny said, and waited for what he felt certain was coming.

"It's happened again, Benny," she replied with a sigh; "now don't pretend not to know what I mean—Tiger is out for mischief once more. That telegram last night must have been from Sir Harker Bellamy."

"I *knew* it!" declared the man who for nearly ten years had been England's invariable choice at centre-half; "directly the guv'nor read it last night I saw 'is eyes sort of spit fire—you know what I mean, m'lady?"

"I do, Benny—worst luck. It all points the same way; he told me at breakfast he wanted a little gentle exercise—he was going walking in the Park. That's bad, isn't it, Benny?"

"Very bad, m'lady. Wot the guv'nor usually means by 'gentle exercise' is a couple of 'ours at squash. An' 'e never as much as came to the garage to see me," went on the henchman. "You mark my words, m'lady, 'e's gone to see that blighter, old Bellamy! That telegram last night *must* 'ave come from 'im."

"I'm pretty sure of that myself, Benny; well, what is there to be done?"

Bannister shook his head; he looked a thoroughly disconsolate man. When the call for action came, he was just as eager as his master to risk his life quixotically; but the distress he saw in his beloved mistress's face now made him feel that if Standish was in that room he'd give him a piece of his mind whatever happened afterwards.

"We can't do a thing, m'lady," he admitted, answering the question; "best watch and wait, sort of."

What reply his mistress would have made to this piece of philosophy was never uttered, for at that moment Matthews, the parlourmaid, entered with a magnificent bouquet of orchids.

"I expect they're from 'im, m'lady," said Benny Bannister sepulchrally; "'e wants to make it up, like."

Sonia's lips trembled. It was so like Tiger to send her flowers after one of the very rare little upsets that they had,

and his thoughtfulness now made her feel on the verge of tears.

"Where are they from, Matthews?" she asked the maid.

"Sovrani's in Bond Street, m'lady," was the answer.

Her mistress smiled. Yes, these magnificent orchids had undoubtedly been sent her by Tiger. Bless him!

But when she stooped over the bouquet, she found a strange card tied to one of the stalks.

She looked at it in amazement, for on it was engraved:

MAJOR VINCENTO CARLIMERO

"But they're *not* from Tiger!" she exclaimed.

Bannister lost his smile:

"*Wot!*" he ejaculated.

"No, Benny, they're from a perfect stranger—a man calling himself Major Vincenzo Carlimero—*oh-h!*" she went on, and, thinking that she was in physical distress—as, indeed, was the case—Bannister rushed to her assistance.

"What's the matter, m'lady?" he enquired anxiously.

She put the flowers down as though they were poisonous.

"'Carlimero'," she said; "Benny, have *you* heard that name before?"

The forehead of Bannister wrinkled itself in perplexity. Had he heard that name before? He should say he had! Why, it was the name of the man whose light Tiger had put out years before! What was this? A blinking corpse come back to life?"

"I seem to remember somethin' like it," he prevaricated; "d'you mind, m'lady, if I 'ave a look at that card myself?"

For answer she waved her hand in the direction of the discarded flowers.

Bannister, groping amidst the blooms, found the visiting-card, plucked it away, and studied it.

"'Major Vincenzo Carlimero'," he read. Then he turned the piece of pasteboard over.

"This bloke's got a nerve, m'lady," he said angrily a few seconds later.

"Read it out, Benny," she ordered him.

In a voice that reflected his disgust, Bannister complied.

"A slight tribute to a most charming lady. I hope to have the pleasure of meeting the beautiful wife of the celebrated Tiger Standish quite soon. Meanwhile, my devoted admiration."

This effusion was initialled "V.C."

"It's a good job the guv'nor isn't 'ere, m'lady," Bannister stated. "Why, strike me pink, if——"

The rest of the sentence was interrupted by Standish himself striding into the room.

"Orchids?" he remarked; "but I ordered roses, my sweet—I've never known Sovrani's make a mistake like that before. Who's been sufficiently gallant to send you these, darling?"

Benny did a dramatic thing by placing the card which he had been reading in his master's hand.

"It's no good tryin' to 'ide anything from you, guv'nor—'ere; you'd better read it for yourself."

Both the watchers were alarmed as they saw Tiger's face as he tore the card up into several small pieces and placed these in his waistcoat pocket.

Sonia, very afraid, started forward.

"Tiger, I knew nothing about it—who is this man?"

He patted her shoulder.

"You needn't have told me that you knew nothing about it, my sweet—and the man is a very special species of slug. Now, I may be fussy, but I don't particularly care for special species of slugs to send flowers to my wife, more especially when they are accompanied by 'Come into the garden, Maud' messages. Benny," he went on, turning to his servant, "I shall want the Bentley in ten minutes and you will drive me. Understand?"

"Now listen, guv'nor——"

"Benny, I shall want the Bentley in ten minutes, and you will drive me."

Sonia clung to his arm.

"Don't you see, darling, that this may be merely a trap?"

This man must be the son of that awful Dr. Carlimero—the man you killed years ago.”

“According to information—which I consider reliable—I believe he is.”

“Well, don’t you see, he has merely done this in order to provoke you?”

“And he has succeeded; behold I am provoked! Benny, the Bentley.”

“If you’d only stop and think a minute, guv’nor——”
But again Sancho Panza was cut off.

“Benny, you’re getting garrulous in your old age. And, in any case, who the hell are you to try to teach me my business? There’s the door!” pointing.

Shaking his head sorrowfully at his mistress, Bannister departed.

“Tiger, if you love me, you won’t do anything stupid.”

Although she realised that it was practically useless to attempt to argue with him in his present mood, she had to make the attempt. “In any case, where does this man live?” she added.

“He’s staying, I understand, at——” and then, a certain measure of comparative calmness overtaking him, he added: “Somewhere in Melton House Terrace, I believe. At least, that was what was on the card.”

“I didn’t trouble to look myself; I thought the orchids were from you, of course.”

Tiger swore volubly but silently beneath his breath. He was in a hell of a spot. On the one hand, his rage was such at this man’s damned impertinence that he felt almost completely out of control; on the other hand, he had to stifle, at all costs, his wife’s present fears.

He compromised by taking her in his arms and kissing her.

“I won’t do anything foolish, lovely,” he said; “that’s a definite promise.”

And then, because he dared not trust himself to say another single word, he kissed her again and walked hurriedly out of the room.

CHAPTER VI

AN EXCHANGE OF COMPLIMENTS

BENNY was waiting by the side of the Bentley.

Pretending not to notice his reproachful glance, Standish started to get into the car. As he did so, he shot the address over his shoulder: "Ronstadtian Embassy, 906, Melton House Terrace."

Bannister poked his face in through the open window.

"Wot was that I 'eard you say, guv'nor?" he enquired.

His master replied concisely.

"If you like to drive to Hell for preference, do so," he said.

With a sorrowful shake of the head, Benny got into his own seat.

A servant wearing a tail-coat and dark striped trousers (not to mention a face that Tiger decided was one of the most aggravating he had ever seen), received the visitor.

"Yes, sir?" he enquired in correct English.

The visitor was curt.

"My name is Standish," he said; "the Honourable Timothy Overbury Standish, son of the Earl of Quorn. I understand that you have a Major Vincenzo Carlimero staying at the Embassy. If so, and if he is in, will you kindly give him this card?"

The servant, accepting the card, bowed himself away. Tiger felt his right foot itching as he did so.

After a wait of perhaps five minutes, the man reappeared.

"Major Carlimero is in the Embassy, sir, and he will be very pleased to see you," he vouchsafed; "will you be kind enough to step this way?"

Tiger *was* kind enough, and, after entering a lift and traversing a long corridor, he found himself in a small, well-appointed room on what appeared to be the second floor of the large building.

A man rose to greet him as he entered behind the servant.

"My name is Carlimero," he stated; "to what am I indebted for this honour, Mr. Standish?"

Tiger took a swift look at him; it was a look that embraced all the speaker's salient features—and he didn't like a single one of them. Yes, there could be no possible doubt but what this fellow was the offspring of the man who had plotted before him to take his life, and whom he had been forced to kill with his bare hands.

"I have called on you, Major Carlimero," he replied, "in order to acquaint you with the fact that I object to perfect strangers sending flowers to my wife."

The other smiled, showing white teeth beneath the red, fleshy lips.

It was not a pleasant smile. It revealed the man's soul and that, again, Tiger decided, was anything but pleasant. It was also a revealing smile—it told Standish that, in a career full of desperate hazards, he had never, perhaps, taken such a colossal risk as this. He remembered that he was standing on enemy soil; that this room was in literal truth a part of Ronstadt itself. And that the state of Ronstadt in conjunction with her Axis partner, Caronia, was expected to launch a terrific surprise attack on his country at any moment. Were not all the Defence Services fully and permanently manned? Were not the Anti-Aircraft Forces standing by their guns throughout each twenty-four hours? He should have remembered, he now thought, the words Sonia had told him: "This may be merely a trap."

Still, here he was, and he would be damned if he showed to this swine a sign of any other emotion except well-controlled anger.

"Perfect stranger?" he heard the other repeat; "but surely, Mr. Standish, that is not correct? Unless my memory plays me false—and I don't think that is the case—surely you are the same heroic gentleman who killed my father a few years back?"

"May I smoke?" asked the visitor; and without waiting for the required consent, Tiger took out his cigarette-case and lit up.

"Yes, Major," he then said, seating himself, "if the

gentleman in question was a certain Dr. Carlimero, late of Harley Street, and the associate of a very precious piece of scum by the name of Rahusen—well”—flicking the ash off the end of his cigarette—“your surmise is absolutely accurate.”

The other man smiled again.

“I imagined I was not at fault,” he said; “and, let me tell you, Mr. Standish, that the sight of you gives me very great pleasure—very great pleasure indeed.”

“That’s fine!” was the comment; “but it doesn’t quite answer the question I came here to put to you.”

“Indeed? What is the question?”

“I want to know, Major Carlimero, by what right you sent flowers to my wife this morning, and why you enclosed a message with them?”

The well-tailored shoulders were shrugged.

“You are my enemy, Standish, but haven’t we a scriptural injunction to the effect that one should love one’s enemies?”

“I’m afraid I should get very angry indeed if you started throwing your arms about me, my friend!”

A sharper note came into the sarcastic voice.

“There is no fear of my doing any such thing.”

“Good! Well, now, you haven’t answered my question,” looking at his watch, “and my car is waiting outside.”

“You want me to tell you why I sent flowers to your wife, Mr. Standish?”

“I certainly do.”

“Well then, I will give you the answer: I admire your wife very much.”

It was only the small inner voice within him which said at that psychological moment: “Don’t be a fool, Tiger—he’s only trying to rile you. If you knock him out you may never leave this place alive,” that prevented Standish from punching the speaker straight in the jaw.

“That’s very kind of you,” he forced himself to reply, “but all the same, I should be glad if you would keep your admiration to yourself. It would certainly be wiser—from your point of view.”

He was about to turn, when the other replied.

"May I compliment you upon being a brave man, Mr. Standish?"

"Er?"

"Brave but somewhat stupid, I think."

"We all have our failings. For instance, if I may be personal, you look rather like a shop-soiled specimen of a film star. I don't know if the effect is merely due to Nature, or whether it is carefully cultivated, but in any case, it is rather offensive." Again he turned to go.

But again he was kept.

"I shall remember that—as I also remember that at this moment you are standing on Ronstadtian soil."

Tiger laughed.

"Don't be a fool; you're not imagining for a moment that I had ignored that fact, surely? But it happens that several very important people in the British Government are also in possession of the knowledge. Will you please excuse me now?"

"In just one moment. I should like you to carry away a parting message."

"Yes?"

"It is, Mr. Standish, that I happen to cherish a very fond memory of my father—the man you murdered."

"Curious taste, but I must respect it, blood being thicker than soap-suds. Well, now . . ."

And this time he did go. Considerably to his surprise, no attempt was made to detain him. Perhaps the bluff he had put up about the British Government had worked; he didn't know; it was sufficient that no effort was made to keep him.

Carlimerro must have rung a bell, for when he got outside the door, he found the same servant waiting. The man walked like a soldier on parade to the lift, stood aside, and a minute later, Tiger found himself in the big hall once again.

Here an amusing scene was being enacted. Benny Bannister, very perturbed, was evidently having a hot altercation with another of the Embassy servants. Tiger heard him exclaim:

"I don't care a damn what you say, poker-back, but if

the guv'nor isn't down 'ere within another couple of minutes, I'm going *hup!*"

Standish walked towards the pair.

"It's all right, Benny; you needn't get bothered. Here I am and in all the same piece."

Bannister's face registered instant and overwhelming relief.

"Thank Gawd for that!" he commented—and, taking his master by the arm, led him to the door.

A couple of minutes after Standish had left that upstairs room, a part of the bookcase lining the left wall was pushed forward and a man showed himself. He was a somewhat impressive figure—if you cared for that type—possessing a square, close-cropped head, a brutal, relentless face and a brusque manner of speech.

"So that was Standish, *hein?*" he commented.

Carlintero smiled his characteristic smile.

"Yes, my dear Greisner, that was Standish."

The Chief of the Ronstadtian Espionage System in London frowned.

"How I kept myself from shooting the swine, I don't know," he declared, motioning towards the secret door from which he had just emerged; "but I remember the words of our glorious Leader . . ." He spoke like a fanatic, and a fanatical fire was in his eyes. Impressive to others of his class, Greisner frequently amused Carlintero, who, as a Caronian, had as much contempt for the average Ronstadtian as the latter had for the opposite number of the Axis. "The glorious Leader said: 'Be cautious now, for the Time is rapidly approaching when we can dispense with all restraint.'"

Carlintero was unable to resist a gibe.

"It was unfortunate that you missed running him down in Rotten Row this morning, my dear Greisner," he said glibly.

The other rapped out an oath.

"Yes," he replied, "but he was lucky then. Next time . . ." And then, going to the telephone, he barked out a series of staccato orders. "That will mean," he explained to the listening Caronian, "that Standish will now be

shadowed night and day. At the first opportunity——” He did not complete the sentence, but his action was illustrative.

“He has had the luck of the devil during all these years,” Greisner went on, “but as a player of that ridiculous football he must realise that he cannot *always* win. And the stakes in this game are death to the loser!” The speaker melodramatically clenched his fist and waved it upwards, narrowly missing in the process the nose of his listener. “Well,” he broke off abruptly, “I have work to do.” And, disappearing the same way as he had come, Vincenzo Carlimero was once again left alone.

CHAPTER VII

EXCITEMENT IN THE HAYMARKET

As he fussed over his master, arranging the rug with great concern, Benny Bannister further voiced his relief.

“Blimey, guv’nor, I didn’t ’arf get the wind up!” he said; “that was why I was ’avin’ that bit of a ’ow-de-do with the bloke I called poker-back.”

His master looked at him with reproachful affection.

“Is it possible, you bandy-legged insect, that you have lost faith?”

“Lost faith, me ’and!” was the explosive answer; “all I did was to remember that you’d gone into that place—and that you might never come out again! But I should ’ave been after you in two skips of a lamb’s tail. That was why I was pushin’ me nose in.”

“You might have had it pushed out again, my old cockolorum,” replied Standish who, now the task was accomplished, felt in a happy mood.

“Ome, guv’nor?” asked Bannister.

“Not yet, Benny; I think we ought to celebrate; drive me to Louis’s in the Haymarket; I want some pipes.”

There was no need for Benny to argue the toss in this

particular matter. In an age of effeminate cigarette-smoking, Standish ignored the fashion by sticking faithfully to a pipe. He had one of the largest collections of pipes in London—and was always adding to it. A MAN in every fibre of his being, he loved his pipe, and, in spite of being in constant training, consumed something like eight ounces of tobacco a week. But it was his own special brand of tobacco—an exclusive cut plug of medium strength which could only be obtained at the shop to which he was now going.

Directly he entered the door, a short, bald-headed man with the face of an elderly cherub, looked up from the noble array of new pipes that he had before him on the glass top of his broad counter.

As he caught sight of his favourite customer, his face lit up like a child promised a treat—a wonderful spectacle.

“Morning, Cherub,” exclaimed Standish; “got anything worth looking at?”

“I think so, Mr. Standish—this is a new design,” pushing a curiously-shaped briar towards the visitor.

“Don’t like it—looks too much like an undertaker from Birmingham having a night out,” was the quick retort; “no, I’ll have a couple of Lentons and a couple of Faradays, and I want to pick them out myself.”

“Of course, Mr. Standish.” In the early days—that was when Standish first went to Louis’s many more years ago than he now cared to recall—the Cherub had been anxious to place his supposed superior knowledge at the disposal of the other, but quickly he had found that Standish’s taste in a briar was unerring; the young man appeared to have an uncanny instinct in knowing exactly how a pipe would turn out.

“Price hasn’t everything to do with it, you know,” Tiger had said; “you can pay as much as three guineas for a briar—and it may prove a dud. You’ve got to use judgment.”

He proceeded to do so now, choosing four beautiful Straight Grains, paid for them, smiled upon The Cherub, and was about to go when he said: “My chauffeur’s outside; I haven’t bought him a pipe for a long time——”

He had no need to say anything more; the other was already on his way.

Five minutes later, Benny Bannister was the proud possessor of a short, squat, bulldog briar that, when Tiger had thrust it between his teeth, "fitted his face" as though he had been born with the pipe in his mouth.

"Thank you, guv'nor," he said delightedly; "it's very nice of you, I'm sure, as the girl said to the Squadron Leader."

"That's enough of that, Benny; you'll corrupt The Cherub's morals, if you aren't careful."

The Cherub himself smiled as though he had his own views on the subject, and asked Tiger how he was off for tobacco.

"Better send me another couple of pounds," was the reply—and the parting was, as usual, a very amicable one.

"Where's the car, Benny?" asked Standish when they stood on the pavement outside the famous little shop.

"In Norris Street, guv'nor," Bannister replied. "Excuse me mentioning it, but do you ever eat?"

Tiger, amused at the question, looked across the street at the large clock.

"My hat! It's half-past two," he answered; "we'd better get home and try to make peace as quickly as possible, Benny."

"That's jes' what I was thinkin' myself," was the sage answer.

As they started to walk forward, Tiger looked on the gay and animated scene with an appreciative eye. He never tired of watching London's crowds; widely travelled as he was, he preferred the sight of his own countrymen and women to the peoples of any other land. And now, as he viewed the human panorama, he smiled in fresh pleasure. Although the threat of instant war was filling everybody's mind, here were men of his own class and race treating the bogey with the tolerant, well-controlled, well-balanced indifference characteristic of the Englishman. This was not because they were "degenerate" as their venomous foreign critics declared them to be—they would be ready enough to

fight when the time came—it was because they absolutely refused to be stampeded or even put out of their stride by screaming headlines in the sensational Press, by nightly repetitions of scares here and there—millions of troops massing in one spot and millions in another—no, they were going about their business as usual, even to the extent of booking cabins for cruises and reserving seats in the trains bound for the Swiss Alps.

Tiger, watching them and their womenkind, felt a fresh throb of joy in being British. He knew that the propagandist maniacs of the Dictator countries would have found a fresh sort of guttersnipe animosity in this fact, but he didn't care a dirty pipe-cleaner for that. He was in London, he was still alive, he had a job of work to do—and that was that.

And then, so suddenly that the whole dreadful thing happened before the least warning could be given, this gay and joyous scene was blotted out and an inferno took its place.

A terrific explosion sounded near at hand: Standish saw men and women looking up into the skies as though expecting to see the warplane from which the bomb had dropped; he heard others shouting "I.R.A."—and felt, as he flattened himself against a shop window, something tear past his left ear, inflicting a momentary pain. He was able to see Benny Bannister's chauffeur's hat fly from his head, as though an urchin had snatched it by means of an attached string—saw, also, a woman hurled bodily through the plate glass of the same shop window against which he had flattened himself, screaming like a mad creature. . . .

His first thought was for the safety of Bannister.

"Are you all right, Benny?" he cried above the terrific hubbub that now raged.

"Wot's left of me, guv'nor—but where's the Bentley? My Gawd! . . ."

Tiger followed his servant's pointing finger. Where the magnificent specimen of coachbuilder's art had been parked, there was nothing—nothing but a big hole in the ground and the sight of damaged shop windows all

round. The car itself had disappeared—blown to smithereens, apparently, through the mysterious explosion that had come like the wrath of God without a moment's warning.

In the miraculous fashion of the London policeman, several constables now showed themselves. They tried, without success at first, to calm the agitated crowd, whose minds—after they had looked up into the sky and found nothing there—were obviously determined to place the blame on I.R.A. terrorists, whose vicious doings were at this time daily and nightly occupying the horrified attention of the authorities.

Bannister was about to push his way forward, in order, it seemed, to give evidence himself, when his master seized his arm.

"No, Benny—let's get away," he whispered.

It was not until they were in the taxi, which they had picked up a quarter of a mile away, that Standish explained what had been in his mind.

"For how long did you leave the car, Benny?" he demanded.

"Leave the car, *guv'nor*?—why, I *never* left the car."

"Not while you were having that barney in the Ronstadtian Embassy with your friend, poker-back?"

Bannister's face fell.

"Sorry, *guv'nor*, I'd forgotten all about that," he said, in a contrite tone; "I can see now what 'appened right enough—while I was in that place, somebody pushed a bomb under the seat of the car . . . I'm sorry, *guv'nor*!"

Standish's face reassured him. And what his master said further sustained his drooping spirits.

"You needn't be sorry, Benny. You probably saved both our lives."

But Bannister wouldn't have that.

"No, *guv'nor*, you're not right there," he replied quickly; "it was my fault that they planted the bomb in the old Bentley." His voice shook momentarily as he remembered the fate of the car he had loved so well. "It was my fault that they were able to play that filthy trick. But it

was you who saved my life—callin' me in to give me that pipe—and I'm never likely to forget it."

"You've got to forget it, Benny," was the unexpected reply; "at least, you've got to say nothing about it at home, understand?"

"Oh, all right, guv'nor; I get you. It would upset Mrs. Standish somethin' terrible, wouldn't it?"

"I'm afraid it would, Benny, so mum's the word."

For the rest of the short journey, Tiger sat silent. He had plenty to think about. Two narrow escapes from death in one day was rather forcing the pace, even from his point of view; he considered it was slightly bad form on the part of friend Carlimero.

Well, he was not going to take that sort of thing lying down. And each item would be put on the bill—waiting until the time came for the account to be paid.

As they pulled up before his house in Chapel Street Tiger gave Benny a further warning.

"Something happened to the Bentley and we had to take it to Horridges' Garage, understand?"

Bannister nodded.

"And, directly the coast is clear, I'll go along to Bill Larg's in Davies Street and buy another."

"The missus will twig it, guv'nor."

"I'm afraid she will," was the slow retort, "but that's the best I can do . . . hullo, sweetheart," he called, as he saw his wife standing on the steps, awaiting him.

Regardless of the shocked feelings of his neighbours, he caught her round the waist and gave her a resounding kiss.

Directly the door was closed, she clung to him.

"Tiger, I'm terribly sorry we had that row this morning—it's wonderful to see you again!"

He chuckled.

"We're never, never going to have another cross word; see that wet and see that dry?"

"Darling fool!" she choked.

He kissed her again.

"Darling, I love you more than ever!" she exclaimed in reply.

They were bitter-sweet words to her listener. Sweet,

because Tiger loved her passionately in return, and bitter because he knew that until a man named Carlimero was dead he would have no peace himself.

And that very night he resolved, if possible, to discover his enemy's secret hide-away—for so long as Carlimero kept himself in the Ronstadtian Embassy, he was as safe as though he had locked himself in a church.

CHAPTER VIII

ADVENTURE OF A TAXI-DRIVER

ALTHOUGH he had not yet had his lunch, Vincenzo Carlimero sat for a considerable time in that second-floor room at the Ronstadtian Embassy, thinking about the recent interview. On the whole, his thoughts were distinctly pleasurable. He had succeeded in his purpose of infuriating Standish—the sending of those flowers to his wife had been a neat touch, he considered—and, moreover, he had been able to study the other's mentality. In spite of all that he had heard to the contrary, he felt that he could prove himself in any situation this man's master.

He could have killed Standish quite easily, as Greisner had said *he* could have killed him. But that end would have been too merciful—and too easy; moreover, though he had not thought very much about it at the time, a whole heap of dangerous international complications would no doubt have ensued.

Although, owing to his Axis connections, the Ronstadtian Embassy would have given him full protection, he knew that Standish's death would have been bound to have leaked out, and there would have been the very devil to pay. Kuhnreich—that was if Greisner had been right about the Leader issuing orders for caution for the time being—would have become possessed by one of his furious rages during which he behaved like a madman—and then he would certainly have suffered.

TIGER STANDISH STEPS ON IT

No, he had acted wisely, and he could well afford to wait. And the waiting would make the end all the more pleasant.

There was the woman, Standish's wife. . . .

Tiger leaned back in his chair.

"The time has come, Benny, my lad, when I think I must give you my confidence," he said.

"It's very good of you, I'm sure, guv'nor," was the reply; "between you and me and Richard the Lion's meat ration, I was wonderin' 'ow long you were goin' to keep things to yourself."

There was a hint of reproach in Benny's voice. Tiger was quick to sense it and make amends.

"Let's have some more beer," he remarked, holding out his silver tankard. "There's nothing like beer to oil the works . . . and have some more yourself."

When the essential office had been performed, Tiger refilled his pipe. The two were in Standish's sanctum at the back of the house; and, apart from the servants, they had the place to themselves, Sonia having accepted an invitation to accompany the Merrifields to the theatre and go on to the opening of a new supper club afterwards. Standish was thankful for her absence because it gave him the opportunity to speak frankly to his henchman.

"Let me start with that telegram I received last night, Benny," he said. "It was from Sir Harker Bellamy."

Bannister put down his glass.

"As though I didn't know it!—as though Mrs. Standish didn't know it, too!" he retorted; "why, it had that old blighter's 'andwritin' all over it, apart altogether from the 'B' by which it was signed."

"Yes," acknowledged his master, "I must say it didn't require much gumption to figure that out. Well, last night at the Savoy, Bellamy told me a strange piece of news."

"'E's always tellin' you strange bits of news, guv'nor," was the acid comment.

"You don't like Sir Harker, do you, Benny?"

"Oh, I'm not going to say that," was the unexpected

judicial answer; "wot I complain about is that directly we're settled down again, up 'e pops, arskin' us to commit suicide once more. It's not fair to you; it's not fair to the missus (begging your pardon, guv'nor); it's not fair to your football, and—if it comes to that—it's not fair to me."

"Why not?"

"Well, because it's a full-sized job lookin' after you when you're on one of Bellamy's stunts."

His master lowered some more beer.

"Don't be a fool, Benny; you know as well as I do that you'd be bored stiff—yes, as bored stiff as I should be myself—if it wasn't for Bellamy and his 'stunts' as you've called them. . . . Well now, let's get to business," he went on in a brisker tone which intimated to his companion that he was not prepared for any further argument; "what Sir Harker told me was this: a gentleman by the name of Carlimero is in London at the moment, and has sworn to do me in as quickly as possible!"

"He's had one try already," was the comment.

"To be absolutely accurate, Benny, he's had two," corrected Standish; "now that I've decided to let you in on everything, I don't mind admitting that the mysterious bomb explosion in the Haymarket this afternoon, when our dear old Bentley was blown to atoms, was the second of a series—the first occurred in Rotten Row this morning when a gentleman tried to get his horse to kick me to death."

Benny pursed his lips.

"Even for *us* that's comin' it a bit too 'igh, guv'nor."

"It certainly is. That's why we're having this talk now. Whether Carlimero—who is the son of the illustrious Dr. Carlimero—was directly responsible for both those outrages, I can't say, but it certainly looks something like it. Anyway, the time has come, Benny, when I have decided to take the counter-offensive——"

"Does that mean that you're goin' into action, guv'nor?" asked Bannister.

"Yes; I told that slug Carlimero in the Ronstadtian Embassy this morning that if there was any more of his

nonsense, I should step on it—or, rather, on him—so he can't say he's not been warned."

"Do we start to-night, guv'nor?"

Tiger nodded.

"Right away."

"I'm game—but what about Mrs. Standish?"

"I'm sorry," was the answer, "but in a case like this I've got to protect myself; if I didn't, I might be shot like a sitting bird—and that sort of thing isn't very much in my line, as you know."

"Well, not exactly! Oh, all right, guv'nor. Do you want the car?"

"No, this isn't a job for the new Bentley; it might spoil the paintwork. But it's a case for a little transformation—ever seen me as a taxi-driver, Benny?" his grin widening.

Bannister's eyes began to pop.

"Strewth, guv'nor—you a taxi-driver?"

"For this night only," was the smiling retort.

"But where in the hell's the taxi?"

"Oh, that's provided for, don't you worry. Now, listen: to-night I'm going to do all the work; all you'll have to do is to sit back in the taxi, dressed in your Sunday best, and a bit of a beard——"

He was interrupted by a cry.

"A bit of a beard, guv'nor!" protested his servant; "oh, I don't know that I could stand for that."

"You'll have to stand for it, Benny. . . . Well, now, no more chin-wag; we have to get busy. But first of all, I must make a 'phone call," and as Bannister's eyes went to the instrument on the small table by the side of the wall, "no, not in here; it might be traced; from the kiosk round the corner in Grosvenor Place."

"You *do* like your mysteries, don't you, guv'nor?" ruminated Bannister.

"When they're strictly necessary—not otherwise," was the reply.

The taxi—whose driver sported an old-fashioned walrus moustache, and whose passenger would undoubtedly have been summed up by any Scotland Yard detective as a

Colonial visitor to London, seeing the sights of the Metropolis—passed slowly in front of the Ronstadtian Embassy in Melton House Gardens. The time was half-past nine, and, although Tiger from experience knew that patience was the very essence of a game like this, he began to wonder if the information which he had received from the Embassy through the telephone call made at the Grosvenor Place kiosk was reliable. With his usual efficiency, Sir Harker Bellamy had “planted” an agent inside the Embassy itself; true, this man merely occupied a minor position, but still he was able to keep tag on a good deal that happened inside the stronghold of the prospective enemy, and Carruthers (he did not go under that name in the Embassy, of course) had passed the word on to him when he had telephoned that Major Vincenzo Carlimero was dining in the Embassy that night but had talked during the meal of going out afterwards. Certainly the car which he was able to recognise from the description given to him by Carruthers as belonging to Carlimero was waiting at the kerb.

Meanwhile, Benny Bannister “got up like a dish of fish,” as he had put it, in his guise of a wealthy Colonial patroniser of London taxi-cabs, had very few misgivings. His faith in his master was so absolute that he was quite content to wait for the next development; meanwhile, he pulled appreciatively at the big cigar—one of a supply with which Standish had provided him—and, looking out on the London scene, felt more like a millionaire than he had ever expected to do. Benny had a simple philosophy, which up to this time had served him well; it was to enjoy the present, forget the past, and look hopefully towards the future.

The taxi made another circuit of the square on the south side of which the Ronstadtian Embassy was situated; and as it neared that impressive building, once the residence of a South African mining millionaire, Benny saw, through the glass that separated them, his master stiffen. Evidently something was about to happen at last!

Looking through the window of the taxi, he saw a man come down the steps of the Embassy, and get into a black limousine waiting at the kerb. A moment later the car

glided off—with the taxi keeping a discreet distance behind.

For a moment Benny had a few doubts. These were based on his practical knowledge of motor-cars. If it was Tiger's intention to keep the limousine in sight, he would have a difficult job, for the superior horse-power of the great car could easily out-distance the more democratic taxi-cab. What was more, surely the man being followed would become suspicious if he noticed his car being trailed by the same vehicle?

But before very long he found himself being corrected on these two points. First of all *this* taxi was a very different affair—as regards engine capacity at least—from the ordinary vehicle of its class, and Tiger showed such adeptness in dodging in and out of the traffic that, unless the passenger in the car was already suspicious, it seemed unlikely to him that any misgiving would arise in his mind. Anyway, the chance had to be taken.

A huge patch of gloomy waste, which Benny was able to recognise as Wimbledon Common, now loomed in front of them. Owing to his having to play the cat-and-mouse game in this strange piece of motor-sleuthing, Tiger had momentarily lost sight of his quarry, and when he came up to it again he was just in time to see the big car disappear into the drive of one of the large mansions overlooking the Common. Crossing the road, he pulled up the taxi-cab beneath some trees which afforded admirable seclusion and, getting down from his seat, conferred with his "passenger."

"Well, so far reasonably good, Benny," he said in a tone that hid some of his disappointment. "The man in the car was undoubtedly Carlimero, and he's gone into that house. He may be paying a purely social call, of course, since I can't imagine that any of the residents in this part of London are anything but what they appear to be. One can't tell, of course, but on the surface, I should certainly say that to-night's effort has been largely wasted."

"I don't agree there, guv'nor," said Bannister; "you

could take a job as a London taxi-driver to-morrer—if you wanted to, that is.”

The mouth hidden by the walrus moustache twitched in acknowledgment of the compliment.

“Very nice of you to say so, Benny; I don’t mind admitting myself that I didn’t do so badly—but what I want to try to find out now is whether it was all worth while. You wait here a bit; there is a fellow over there I want to ask a question or two.”

Benny, who by this time was almost at the end of his second cigar, leaned forward.

“Will you be all right by yourself, guv’nor?” he enquired anxiously; “you never know, y’know.”

“You stay here,” was the rejoinder.

Tiger, using the gait of a man who spent most of his waking hours at the wheel of a car, crossed the road. The person he had espied walking on the other pavement stopped at his hail.

“Beg parding, sir, but could you tell me who lives in this ’ouse?” pointing to the drive up which he had watched Carlimero’s car go. “I got a passenger ’ere,” jerking his other thumb back in the direction of the taxi-cab, “and——”

To his delight, he was cut short.

“Yes, driver,” said the man, a tall, distinguished-looking individual, who looked as though he might be a retired army officer, “that house is Fairlawns, and is lived in by a very great friend of mine, a Professor Lablonde.”

“Professor Lablonde, eh . . . ? No,” he went on, shaking his head, “that’s not the party my passenger wants; ’e was talking about a Mr. Fairweather.”

This time it was his informant who shook his head.

“I know nobody by the name of Fairweather round about here, driver—sorry,” and he walked on.

Purely out of habit, Standish watched him for a few seconds, and then saw him disappear up the drive of Fairlawns. Curious? Or was it? True, the fellow had said that he was a great friend of the man who lived in this house, but——

His further musings on the point were sharply interrupted;

on the other side of the road there came the sound of an unmistakable scuffle. Benny must have been attacked!

Sprinting across with the speed that had become familiar to the followers of the Swifts Football Club supporters, he found his surmise correct. Benny, out of the taxi, was struggling with no fewer than four assailants. Whether these were ordinary thugs, merely intent on robbery, or whether they were connected in some way with that night's happenings, he didn't stop to speculate; but hurling himself into the fray, hit out to right and left.

So intent was he on rescuing his servant from disaster that he did not think of himself; and it was in consequence of this fact that he did not stop once to look round.

He paid the penalty by receiving a heavy blow on the back of the head. As he reeled, he saw the unmistakable flash of a knife. . . .

"By Gawd, guv'nor, I thought it was all up then!"

Tiger, recovering from the brief spell of unconsciousness, looked up into the anxious face of Bannister. He was lying on the cushions of the taxi-cab, he noticed.

"Where's——?" he started.

"'Opped it," was the succinct reply; "you made a couple of 'em feel very sorry, and when I kicked the cove with the knife in the never-mind-where, 'e 'opped it, too—but he went a bit splay-footed, I can tell you! As for the other, 'e seemed to kind of lose 'eart after that and you and me were alone once again. . . . But that's not to say we're goin' to be alone much longer, so far as I can see; 'ow are you feelin' now? I'm goin' to get at the wheel of this 'ere bus and tootle away."

"You saved my life, Benny," said Standish, slowly recovering his wits.

"Well, wot abaht it? We're only quits once again," replied Bannister as he closed the door of the cab and proceeded to climb into the driver's seat.

A few moments later, a taxi, driven at such a furious pace that it broke all existing speed records for London taxi-cabs, shot away in the direction of the West End.

CHAPTER IX

THE RISING FROM THE DEAD

PROFESSOR EDMUND LABLONDE was in the hall waiting for his visitor. The Egyptologist was in a state of such great excitement when he shook hands that Carlimero wondered if the other was not due for another of his heart attacks.

"It has come!" the Professor said in a tense whisper; "you shall see it soon—I promise you!"

Carlimero, who had his own reasons for feeling excited, said the appropriate thing. He knew very well to what the Professor was referring; according to his own statement, he had recently purchased the mummy of Ptah, the Overseer of Rameses III. In doing so he had outbid by several thousands of pounds an American collector. His agents in Paris had had definite instructions to purchase the mummy and to go to any price to secure it. Now, apparently, it had arrived at the house in Wimbledon, and Lablonde was eager to show it to his friend.

"But you are not looking well, my dear Carlimero," the Professor said, after looking at his caller; "has anything happened to upset you?"

The Caronian decided that it would be better to tell the other the truth.

"I'm not sure—but I may have been followed here to-night," he replied; "all the way from the Embassy, a taxicab kept dodging in and out of the traffic and it was just behind me when I turned into the drive a few minutes ago."

He expected his hearer to evidence some sign of perturbation, but the crazy Lablonde merely chuckled—obscenely.

"Would it be the man Standish who followed you?" he enquired.

Carlimero shook his head.

"I don't know," he replied; "but if so it might be serious."

Again Lablonde chuckled—and this time his merriment sounded sinister.

“You needn’t worry,” he said; “I have four men on guard always outside this house. If they saw anything—or anyone—suspicious, they would beat them up first and bring them in here afterwards. With so much at stake”—here the fanatical fires which were never long absent from the speaker’s eyes broke out again—“I must take all necessary precautions.”

The butler entering broke in on Carlimero’s reply.

“Colonel Fortesque has called, Professor,” the man said.

Lablonde made an impatient gesture.

“I can’t be bothered with him now. I have a tremendous lot to do. Give him my excuses and say that I’m indisposed.”

“Very good, sir,” and the servant disappeared.

“Shall we go down now?” continued Lablonde, turning to his visitor.

It was on the tip of Carlimero’s tongue to spring the sensation which, he felt certain, was due to take place before many more minutes. How would Lablonde take it? How would he react to the amazing fraud that had been practised, and of which in some measure at least, he was the victim? Well, if he showed any resentment, he would have to be got rid of at once—the thing could easily be done; they would be far enough away from any possible interference. And the bad heart of Lablonde would be a sufficient alibi.

Deciding that he would defer the disclosure, he assented, and followed his host to a secret door in the flooring and down a long, steep flight of steps until he found himself in a huge cellar that had once evidently been used for storing wines.

“There is perhaps my greatest trophy!” declared Lablonde pointing to a bier on which was a magnificent mummy-case. This was open so that the masked face of the bandaged occupant was freely exposed.

As he teetered towards the case, wringing his hands and showing every sign of almost maniacal delight, Carlimero

found himself wondering whether the old fool's brain had not completely gone.

"You shall take off the mask yourself," declared the Professor; "that is the treat I have reserved for you. In a moment from now you shall look upon the face of a man who has been dead for thousands of years!"

With that, beckoning to his companion to follow him, he clambered up the steps of the catafalque, and peered into the huge coffin.

"Take off the mask," he whispered, his frail body and wrinkled face twitching with excitement.

Carlimeró's hand reached out. He took the mask from the mummy's face—and then Professor Lablonde gave a wild shriek.

For the mummy's face had moved; moreover, its lips spoke.

"Well, Carlimeró, you see I managed it!" said the man who was supposed to have died two thousand years before.

With Lablonde speechless with amazement, the mummy sat up, and began to unwind the bandages which had been about his body after climbing out of the sarcophagus.

"You must introduce me, Carlimeró," he said, smiling malignly, after the Caronian, with a few deft strokes of a pocket-knife, had entirely freed the other.

For all his former resolution, Carlimeró found himself nervous. But this thing had to be done, and he did it.

"Allow me to introduce to you, Professor, my friend Rahusen," he said.

The Egyptologist stared at him. It was a menacing stare, and Carlimeró, in spite of himself, drew back a little.

"Why have you played this trick off on me?" the Professor demanded. "With my weak heart, it might have been the death of me—do you realise that?"

It was the "dead" man who replied.

"This deception was necessary, Professor; I had to get back to London, and, with all the ports and air stations watched, this was my one real chance. You must forgive Carlimeró, because he has acted in your own best interests—difficult as that may seem to you at the moment. You wish

to become a Pharaoh ruling over Egypt once again; you wish to drag the name of Britain in the dust. Well, I, Rahusen, can promise that you shall do both!"

"You talk big, my friend," was the answer.

"I not only talk big, but I can act big, my little man," said Rahusen, giving his unwilling host such a look of concentrated malignity that Lablonde put up a hand to his eyes as though to shut out the horrific sight.

"What use is a dead man to you compared with ME? Carlimero knows my record; he knows of the successes I have scored over the British; he knows that I am the greatest organiser alive! Haven't I worked for years in London for Ronstadt? Ask any of their agents what they know of Rahusen?"

The old man appeared convinced in spite of his former animosity.

"But my money—I paid my Paris agent ten thousand pounds."

"It will be refunded to you, Professor," replied Rahusen; "besides, the supposed mummy of Ptah the Overseer of Rameses III was a fake—the American collector will be swindled!"

A thin, cackling laugh greeted the statement. The thought of his rival being diddled in this way evidently appealed to the humour of Lablonde.

"That is capital!" he cried, rubbing his hands together; "capital!"

After this demonstration, complete mollification became easy. Rahusen, who now disclosed himself as wearing a silk shirt, shorts and stockings, agreed.

"Yes, it was a capital scheme," Lablonde said. "Those fools of Customs officers never suspected anything, I suppose?"

"Not a thing," was the answer.

"But how did you breathe?"

"If you look at the case you will find holes," replied Rahusen. "And the natural pallor of my face would have helped if they had become too inquisitive."

Then came a slight change of temperature. Lablonde turned to the third man.

"All the same, Signor Carlimero, you should have told me," stated Lablonde. "To have deceived a friend like this—it is unpardonable."

The Caronian hastened to repair the breach.

"I did not like to tell you because our plan might have misfired," he explained; "but now that Rahusen is here, everything will be all right." He did not go on to explain that it was because of his jealousy and hatred of the Ronstadtian agents with whom he was supposed to work that he sent an S O S out to his father's former Chief whom he knew was living in Paris. After being worsted in his latest encounter with Tiger Standish, Rahusen had lain low in the French capital awaiting an opportunity to return to London. This determination had been frustrated by the vigilant watch that had been kept on sea and air ports throughout the United Kingdom; and, as Rahusen now acknowledged, but for the ingenious ruse which Carlimero had himself thought out—he was gracious enough to acknowledge his debt to the younger man—he might still be on French soil.

Lablonde again became mollified.

"So long as you place yourself entirely at my disposal, and do all I want you to do, Mr. Rahusen, I shall forget the trick," he stated. "You spoke just now of Ronstadt—are you still being employed by that country?"

It did not need the sign from Carlimero to remind Rahusen that he must give a discreet reply to this direct question.

"I have come to London to place myself exclusively at your service, Professor," he said—and for once he made his voice sound humble and conciliatory.

The house telephone by the side of Lablonde rang. The Professor listened and then turned to Carlimero.

"Herr Greisner has called," he announced. "I shall have to see him."

"In that case, Professor, I am afraid I must be excused," put in Rahusen. "It would complicate matters very seriously, I am afraid, if Herr Greisner knew that I was in London. Let me tell you something in confidence: although the Ronstadt agents are making you believe that

they are working exclusively towards crowning you King of Egypt, yet I know from conversations I have had in Paris that they are merely using you as a pawn."

"WHAT?" exploded the Egyptologist.

"Please be calm!" replied Rahusen in a tone that convinced Lablonde he would be wise to obey the behest; "I haven't time now to tell you more, but directly this man Greisner has gone, I will give you proof of what I have just said. Meanwhile, behave to him exactly as you would have done in normal circumstances—otherwise, stupid fool as he is, he may become suspicious. Now, remember, Professor, I am your friend—your friend to the death!"

The speaker's manner was so convincing, in spite of the melodramatic language he had purposely used, that Lablonde lost no further time in arguing.

"Very well," he said, "I trust you. You stay here and wait until the man has gone; meanwhile, I will go up and receive Herr Greisner."

"I had better come with you perhaps," remarked Carlimero.

"Certainly, my friend—aren't you and Herr Greisner on the closest possible terms?"

Carlimero did not reply to this, but, behind the Professor's back, he exchanged a swift look with Rahusen.

"You will not say anything about me being here?" remarked the latter.

"Of course not," replied Lablonde. He spoke as though he had already attained to Pharaoh-rank.

When the Chief of the Ronstadtian Espionage System was shown into the big upstairs room a few minutes later, he smiled grimly at Carlimero, after saluting his host.

"I'm glad to find you here," he said, "because it enables me to tell you that I have settled with Standish."

The Latin was unable to conceal his dislike of the other.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand you," he replied sarcastically.

Greisner noted the inflexion in the man's voice and replied heatedly.

"It is a pity you Caronians do not care for plain lan-

guage," he retorted. "I have said that I have finished with Standish; he was blown to pieces in the Haymarket this afternoon. Whilst he was at the Embassy talking to you to-day, I arranged for a bomb to be placed beneath the seat of his car."

Carlimero's shrug of the shoulders was offensive.

"I am afraid you are being too optimistic, Herr Greisner," he replied; "for, according to my own information, Standish was seen entering his house in Chapel Street, Mayfair, about two-forty-five this afternoon. A bomb may have blown his car to pieces in the Haymarket, as you say, but he was not in it. Your own agents should have told you that—especially as you informed me at the Embassy to-day that you had the man under constant watch. And may I ask why you did not give me your confidence in this matter?"

The other bridled.

"Why should I do so?"

"Because, as you know, this man Standish is my special affair. Whilst he is an enemy of both our countries, the question of his—shall we say, dissolution?—was to be left entirely to me. Isn't that so, Professor?" turning to Lablonde.

The latter, who had been observing with increasing anxiety the growing quarrel between the two other men, put up his hand in a gesture of deprecation.

"I do not want to be brought into this," he replied; "all I asked was that when Standish was captured, he should be brought here—for *me* to deal with him. I'm sorry, Herr Greisner, that you did not remember that fact."

The Ronstadtian temporised. The time had not come for him to have an open breach with this crazy fool.

"I'm sorry, Professor," he said in a surprisingly humble tone; "but I am afraid the matter has been taken rather out of my hands: word has come through from Menke that Standish is to be got rid of at any price."

Carlimero stamped his foot.

"I don't care, Herr Greisner, what orders have come through from Menke; I tell you that Standish must only be dealt with by me."

"You have had time," acridly commented Greisner. "And," thrusting his scarred face forward, "am I to take my orders from you?"

Carlimero shrugged again.

"Perhaps if you did, my friend, you would have more success."

"It shall be reported!" roared the other. "Professor, I wish you good evening!" And he stamped out of the room.

Lablonde, whose body was shaking, turned to the Caronian.

"I cannot have any quarrels in this house; remember that we are all working for the same end."

In spite of his blistering rage—if Greisner had stayed in that room he would have attacked him—Carlimero restrained himself. Lablonde was still too useful to him to be put out.

"I'm sorry, Professor," he replied; "but these Ronstadtians are barbarians—they have no manners. You saw how Greisner himself behaved just now?"

Lablonde nodded.

"Yes, they are indeed barbarians," he confirmed; "but no quarrels, if you please."

"Very well, Professor."

CHAPTER X

A PIECE OF SECRET HISTORY

AN hour later, Carlimero was acting as host to Rahusen in the small house which he had taken under another name in the adjoining suburb of Streatham. It was to this retreat that he came when he was not to be seen at the Ronstadtian Embassy. Under the name of "Charles Mott," he was supposed by his neighbours to be the chief waiter at an (unknown) Soho restaurant.

"We are entirely alone here," he told Rahusen; "so you

can talk quite freely. Tell me, my father's friend, what really induced you to come to London? I had your message from Paris, saying that you intended to make the effort, which was why I thought out the plan which has proved so successful."

Rahusen, whose countenance had such an unnatural pallor that he had become known as "The Man with the Dead Face," reached out for a cigarette.

"My coming to London is really a piece of secret contemporary history," he remarked, with a mirthless smile. "But first of all tell me: how are you getting on with your esteemed *confrères* at the Ronstadtian Embassy?"

"I hate the brutes; they are uncivilised barbarians!" declared Carlimero.

Rahusen threw away the match he had just used, and blew a thin cloud of smoke.

"If the rest of the world knew how suspicious you two peoples are of each other, it would dismiss the threats of the propagandists like Schroeder with the contempt they really deserve," he remarked; "you mustn't take offence at that, my dear Carlimero, because you are sufficiently intelligent to appreciate the truth, I know."

The other nodded.

"Yes, I know the truth—it is being driven home to me more deeply every day. We should have been better off alone. As it is, we are being dragged along tied hand and foot to Kuhnreich's chariot. And that is going to prove a Juggernaut, killing all who ride in it."

"As a 'neutral'," continued Rahusen, after agreeing with this remark, "I can watch the present international comedy with complete detachment." After waiting to see what effect the words might have on his hearer, the Man with the Dead Face continued: "I have come to join forces with you, the son of my dead friend, at the express command of Signor Brassiano himself!"

"Brassiano?" So great was Carlimero's surprise that he stared for a few moments incredulously at the other man.

"Yes, Brassiano specially commissioned me to come to London and join forces with you, as I have already said.

But before I add anything more," Rahusen went on, "I think I must explain why he did so. I referred just now to the deep distrust that you Caronians have of your Axis partners, the Ronstadtians—well, here is a story, for the truth of which I can personally vouch, which bears eloquent testimony to that well-rooted suspicion.

"You know, of course, that it was only through special pressure put on him by his son-in-law, Count Milano, that Brassiano finally consented to a military alliance with Ronstadt? But he never trusted Kuhnreich as, I suppose, Kuhnreich has never really trusted him. Why should he? In the last war your country went over to Ronstadt's enemies, and the new power in Ronstadt has never forgotten that fact—nor, let me remind you, is she ever likely to forget it."

Disregarding the younger man's frown, Rahusen continued:

"Six weeks ago, five Caronian engineers were sent on the special command of Brassiano to the former Lavanian Armament Works at Pepó which Kuhnreich took over when he overran Lavania—and now they have all mysteriously disappeared."

"Murdered?"

"Undoubtedly. But not by the Lavanian Police, let me tell you, but by the Secret Police of Ronstadt. This is what happened," the speaker continued in a level, detached tone, that added drama to an already dramatic tale.

"The special task of these five engineers was to obtain copies of the blue prints of the new, quick-firing, light-weight machine-gun designed at the conquered Lavanian works, and also to inspect the jigs and tools required for making them. But Lavania, ever since being raped by Kuhnreich in that lightning *coup* of his, hated the Axis partner of their loathed enemy almost as much as they hated that enemy himself. They were aware, also, that the Caronian engineers should by rights have gone to the Ronstadt authorities and made their request to them, but it was owing to the mistrust of their allies that the Caronians went direct to Pepó.

"Leaving liberal bribes to ensure that they would get

the right plans and guns shown to them, and not substitute plans, the Caronians then prepared to leave the country—but they never reached the frontier.”

“Why?” ejaculated the listener.

The Man with the Dead Face smiled his mirthless smile.

“For the very simple reason, my dear fellow, that the Lavanians, intending to kill two birds with one stone, denounced the Caronian engineers to the Ronstadt Secret Police—and the latter did the rest!”

“Horrible!” commented Carlimero; “horrible!”

Rahusen shrugged.

“Yes, horrible—if you are thin-skinned,” he commented, “but you Caronians would have done exactly the same thing if the situation had been reversed. The supreme joke was that the real plans had been brought to London meanwhile. Now,” he went on in a brisker tone, “you will appreciate why, when Brassiano heard that I was hiding in Paris, he sent a special plane for me to go to Corsa.

“I saw him in his private office, and it was there that he gave me my instructions. I was to come to London to act as secret chief of the Caronian Espionage System, and amongst my duties,” here he lowered his voice, “was to keep a very sharp watch on the doings of my former employers.”

“It is an amusing situation,” ironically commented Carlimero; “but a very dangerous one, I should say.”

“Dangerous? Yes, I suppose it is, but you ought to know my record sufficiently well, Carlimero, to realise that danger has no threat for me.” The thin lips curled back to show wolfish teeth. “And after the reception that swine Strassber gave me when by a fluke Standish and Bellamy beat me the last time I was here,* I shall be only too pleased to pit my wits against those of Ronstadt. Yes, most certainly I shall!” smiling again.

Carlimero held out his hand.

“I welcome you not only on your own behalf, Rahusen, but also on behalf of my country; we will work together—not only against England, as represented by Standish and Bellamy, but against Ronstadt, as represented by that swine

*See *Tiger Standish Takes the Field*.

Greisner! How I stopped myself from hitting him on the jaw I do not know!"

Meanwhile, Greisner, on his way back to the Ronstadtian Embassy, was evolving another plan whereby he could both humiliate the man who had been rash enough to insult him that night whilst striking Standish a deadly blow—a blow from which this time there could be no possible escape.

CHAPTER XI

THE DARTING DEATH

SONIA looked up from her newspaper as Tiger entered the dining-room.

"What a dreadful thing to happen!" she commented.

"My dear sweet," he drawled as he bent to kiss her, "the world to-day is overflowing, simply overflowing, with dreadful happenings! And whatever this latest specimen is, I absolutely refuse to allow it to interfere with my breakfast." With that he strolled over to the sideboard and began to inspect the various silver dishes that were being kept hot.

Waiting until he had sat down and commenced his porridge, Sonia continued with her remarks.

"I know the world is full of dreadful happenings, darling," she said, "but these I.R.A. bomb outrages are getting too abominable. Why, according to the *Daily Megaphone* here, another took place in the Haymarket yesterday afternoon. I saw something on the placards last night when I was going to the theatre with the Merrifields, but I didn't trouble to buy a paper. But here it is——" holding out the copy of the paper.

Standish gave the screaming headlines on the front page only a casual glance.

"That new cook's turning out very well," he said, to his wife's exasperation; "I don't think I've ever tasted better porridge than this."

"Never mind your porridge; why don't you pay attention to me?" And again she held up the copy of her newspaper. But Tiger did not reach out to take it.

"I can see it quite well from here," he stated; "and, my dear, if I don't appear to pay as much attention to your remarks this morning as you would like me to, let me say that in my opinion, the popular Press of this country leaves a very great deal to be desired." As though he felt the subject mastering him, he actually laid down his porridge spoon.

"What can you say of an institution that employs presumably male writers to twitter about such maudlin subjects as the flowers in their gardens, the locks on their mothers' heads, and the dogs that accompany them, presumably on their nauseating walks abroad? What, also, can you say of newspapers that devote their front pages to sensationalising out of all proportion an event like that," nodding towards the paper she was still holding, "and exhorting their readers on an inside page to keep calm because this is the best of all possible governments and Uncle Tom Noddy himself is at the helm? What, also, can you say about the mentality of people who devote half a page to telling some poor misshapen wretch how to cure her thick ankles and get rid of her warts?"

Sonia burst out laughing.

"I know!" she agreed. "I never read one of those so-called 'women's feature' articles without threatening to heave."

"My darling, not at breakfast, if you please!" said her husband in mock reproof.

Sonia flushed.

"Don't be a fool! You know what I mean!"

"Yes, I know what you mean—it's the way you express yourself!"

She flushed again.

"But that's got little to do with what we're discussing at present," she went on; "*you* were in the Haymarket yesterday, weren't you, Tiger?"

Standish burst into a loud fit of coughing.

"What is this?" he cried; "am I being watched or

something? It's unfair! I don't even wear co-respondent's shoes!"

"No, Tiger, I haven't gone to the trouble of having you watched yet—but at the theatre last night I met Elsie Summers; it was she who said that she saw you and Benny standing on the pavement outside Louis's shop yesterday about two-thirty."

"That's right," he replied brightly. "I'd just been into Louis's to buy a few pipes."

"Then you must have seen this bomb explosion?"

"Of course I saw it—but I don't come blabbering home like some husbands breathing fire and disaster on the woman I love! You ought to know me better than that, Sonia."

"I know you quite well enough, my dear," she remarked, sighing.

"And what's the verdict?"

"Need you ask?"

"Well, I'd like to know, I think, all the same," spearing a kidney.

But Sonia would not be drawn; instead of replying to this direct hint, she turned to her newspaper again. She was very much a woman.

"According to the *Daily Megaphone*, the explosion might not have been caused by I.R.A. terrorists after all; they seem to think that it was the work of enemy agents."

"God save me from the Blather Boys!" cried her husband; "those fellows would see a two-inch headline in a hen laying an egg! Forget all about it, my dear! And get on with your breakfast—that's far more important. Shopping this morning?"

She nodded.

"I thought I would . . . will you be wanting the car—the new car?" she went on, without batting an eyelid.

Tiger was equally mask-like.

"It's a beauty, don't you think? Bill Larg offered me the pick of the new bunch."

"What's happened to the old one? You told me nothing about the exchange."

Tiger leaned towards her.

"Is it possible that the wife of me bosom is developing the habit of asking unnecessary questions?"

"I think it's a lovely car, darling," she compromised. She knew from the expression on her husband's face that Tiger was in no mood that morning, in spite of his bantering manner, to be "put through the hoop," as he termed it. He was up to something, she knew; there was a mystery about the new Bentley; but, as he had not decided yet to give her his confidence, she would have to be content with drawing her own conclusions. That was the worst of being married to a man like Tiger; it was a mixture of heaven and the other place—and the latter always seemed to materialise when she felt most happy.

"Good! How did you like the show last night?" Tiger's manner had changed; the tenseness had gone out of his voice; he was like a schoolboy again.

"It was quite amusing," she answered; "but I do wish that these modern actors would learn to talk instead of mumble."

"Yes, talking on the stage seemed to go out with Henry Irving. . . . Can I have some more coffee?"

It had been an awkward half an hour or so, and once again Tiger felt pangs of conscience. But, damn it, he couldn't tell her the truth—how could he possibly say that he had been obliged to take up the old Standish custom of slug-hunting because the son of a man he had been forced to kill was out for his own blood? It just couldn't be done! The only thing was to be as speedy as possible in hunting this rat Carlimero out, and sending him to join his parent.

He certainly didn't wish to die himself. As he strolled down St. James's Street, exchanging greetings with a man every dozen yards or so, he felt that life had never been so pleasant. The old *joie de vivre* was present in quite large quantities at that moment.

So it was that when he reached his favourite club, the Junior Corinthian, he beamed expansively upon the chief hall-porter. The latter in return looked as though he had just received the accolade.

"Good morning, Mr. Standish," he said, with the smile he reserved for his special favourites.

"Good morning, Latimer; I should like your opinion of this one." Taking out one of the pipes that he had purchased at Louis's the previous afternoon, he drew the porter to one side and waited for the verdict.

"I don't think I've ever seen a more beautiful grain, Mr. Standish," was the reverential comment, after a couple of minutes of rapt inspection.

"I'm glad you like it—put a little whisky in the bowl for a few hours before you start on it," and to the amazement of the servant, he had passed on.

In the big rack outside the smoking-room, he found a note. Opening this he read:

"Will you please ring up Whitehall 0011X immediately?"

Twenty minutes later, pretending to curse the fate which was sending him out into the cold, cold world instead of allowing him to bake in front of the huge smoking-room fire, Tiger found himself in very familiar surroundings. How many times had he passed into this secret room of the Director of Q.1.?

"What's the idea, Old Fright?" he asked of Bellamy.

"Didn't you tell me to get into touch with you at your club," was the affectedly indignant answer.

"Certainly! But damn it all, I don't expect to be rung up by you at all hours of the day and night! I had scarcely got into the place before I had to spend twopence dialling you. What do you want, anyway?"

Sir Harker Bellamy leaned back in his padded chair.

"I want a report—I want to know what's happened to you since I saw you last."

"Oh, you do, do you? Well, let me tell you that a good deal has happened—there's been another schemozzle."

The keen eyes of the older man glinted.

"Do you mean to say that Carlimerio has made another attempt on your life?"

"If you prefer the stilted language, the answer is 'Yes.'"

At least, I suppose it was Carlimero, because it happened very shortly after I paid him a visit at the Ronstadtian Embassy yesterday."

Bellamy jumped up in his chair.

"What damn-fool thing have you done now?" he demanded angrily; "you're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

"I should scorn to have such a beastly hobby," was the complacent answer.

"Do you mean to say you actually visited him at the Embassy?"

"I've already told you so."

"And did he receive you?"

"Well, if it wasn't Carlimero it was a life-size portrait of him. Look here, B., I'm scarcely the type of bloke to allow a Caronian mess like Carlimero to send flowers to my wife, especially when they're accompanied by loving messages."

"Did he do that?"

"Use the brain, old boy! What's the matter with you this morning? For God's sake, stop the cross talk! When I tell you a thing, it's jonnick, and I don't want to have to repeat it. Yes, Carlimero did send flowers to Sonia, and it got my goat properly. So I oozed along to the Embassy, and gave him a general outline of what he must and must not do in the future."

The amazed expression died on Bellamy's face. The Director of Q.I. sat down again and began to fill his pipe.

"You'll never curb that impetuosity of yours, I suppose?" he remarked regretfully as he struck a match.

"I don't suppose so—why?"

Bellamy shook his head.

"Don't you realise that sending those flowers was a very cunning move on Carlimero's part?"

"I've got a brain that's largely composed of bread and milk—enlighten me."

"He wanted to meet you face to face so that he could study you at close quarters."

"Well, he had his opportunity."

"But don't you see, Tiger, that you fell for the scheme?"

"All I know is that the fellow insulted my wife, and I had to warn him that if he did it again, he'd be sorry."

"Did he threaten you in any way?"

"Not exactly. He just pointed out the elementary fact that I was on Ronstadtian soil and that if anything happened it would be entirely my own fault."

"Exactly."

"Curb the moanings; they're getting monotonous. On the other hand, I told him that several important members of the British Government were fully aware that I'd made that call and that if there was any sticky work in prospect, then all sorts of international complications might ensue and the balloon would go up with a vengeance. It was amusing to watch the blighter's face."

"It must have been a very amusing scene altogether," was the acrid retort. "The main thing, however, is that you got away safely."

Tiger gave him yet another jolt.

"There never was any risk, you old cockroach! And now I want to ask *you* one or two things. Do you know anything about a Professor Lablonde, who lives at a house called Fairlawns in Parkside, overlooking Wimbledon Common?"

"Lablonde?"

"I'm afraid you're not very bright this morning, you old buzzard. I said Lablonde (presumably he spells it L-A-B-L-O-N-D-E, or it may be without the 'E') and I meant it."

"What's this got to do with Carlimero?"

"It may have something, or it may have nothing," went on Standish; and then, to the accompaniment of an occasional chuckle from his listener, he proceeded to tell the story of his previous night's adventure.

"I'll have enquiries made at once," promised Bellamy when he had come to an end.

"Thank you—but remember, if there is anything in it, the pigeon is still exclusively mine. Understand?"

"Go away—I'm very busy," was his Chief's retort.

The new Bentley was certainly a joy to the eye as well as a

poem on wheels. If she had not had that gnawing anxiety at the back of her mind, Sonia would not only have been very proud but very pleased with her husband's latest purchase. But her previous intuitive feeling that there was some mystery about this hasty exchange of cars (in the ordinary way, Tiger never did a thing of that sort without consulting her) was more than confirmed by her first look at Benny Bannister's face as he opened the door of the new Bentley.

"Good morning, madam," he said in his official chauffeur's style.

"Good morning, Benny—we shall have to get you a new uniform to match the new car."

She felt almost ashamed for being so cattish as she watched the expression of dismay come into Bannister's face.

"Yes, madam," was all he replied, however; "where would you like to go first?"

Having given the address of her tailor, she leaned back and gave herself a penance. For being so naughty that morning she would promise not to ask another single question either of Tiger or Bannister until she had been awarded their confidence.

It was twenty minutes before the luncheon bell was due to ring when she returned home. Her husband, the butler informed her, was not yet in, and feeling, as she always did, an intolerable ache when he was away from her for long, she went into the morning-room overlooking Chapel Street, and picked up an illustrated magazine. As she did so, the memory of the treatise on the modern British Press to which Tiger had regaled her at breakfast that morning came back, causing her to smile.

That was one of the many extraordinary things about Tiger. Although he pretended to have no knowledge of anything—being much too lazy—yet, when the occasion demanded it, he proved himself to be able to discuss the particular subject matter at great length; and the fact that he did so in a bantering sort of way could not conceal his mastery of the topic.

She looked at her watch. Unless he came in soon, he

would be lunching at his club. And that would mean, in turn, that she would not see him again until dinner. The ache returned. Was she a fool to give this one man all the devotion that was in her heart? She didn't think so.

A peculiar sound, frequently repeated, drew her attention to Richard the Lion. The half-Persian cat was certainly behaving in a very curious way; the noise she had heard was caused by his sniffing at the top left-hand drawer of the Chippendale desk at which she was accustomed to sit when doing her correspondence. The cat was showing distinct signs of anger, and his fur was ruffled.

"What's the matter, darling?" she asked, getting up and crossing to him. "What is it, then?"

For the first time since he had been a member of the Standish family, Dick spat at her. She was so surprised that she could only conclude that the animal was ill.

"Poor old Dick! What's the matter?" she repeated.

He looked at her in such a strange manner that she was forced to the conclusion that there was something in that top drawer which had roused his fury. What could it be? She knew from experience that Richard the Lion was a super-intelligent cat—he had evidenced this on too many previous occasions for her to have any doubt on the subject—and, anxious to ease his mind, she put out her hand to open the drawer.

At that moment, she drew it quickly back again for the very sufficient reason that Dick had clawed her.

This was getting beyond a joke, and she severely reprimanded him. Matthews, the parlourmaid, happening to enter the room at that moment, Sonia told her to fetch the iodine, and then asked if she had given the cat anything to upset him?

"No, madam," was the reply; "he had his usual meal this morning, and, so far as I know, he has not been given anything by the cook since."

"Well, there's something very wrong with him; he not only spat at me just now, but did this," and she showed her wounded hand. "It's so unlike him."

"Oh, madam, what a naughty thing to do," returned the

parlourmaid; "I'll get the iodine at once. One can't be too careful with a cat's scratch."

Sonia was sucking the wound and looking reproachfully at Dick meanwhile, when the door opened again and Tiger burst in.

"Thought I wouldn't get here for lunch," he cried, in his breezy way; "old Satterthwaite wanted me to feed at the club but I—why, what's the matter, old dear?" he broke off quickly. "And what's the matter with his Royal Highness here?"

"I don't know," his wife answered; "he clawed me a moment ago—I've never known him do such a thing before."

"Rascal!" cried Standish, going towards the cat with the obvious intention of picking him up and spanking his equivalent of a bottom; "complete slops for a couple of days! Your blood must be overheated!"

"I don't think it's that, Tiger," stated Sonia; "he seems suspicious of that top drawer," pointing. "He's been sniffing and making little cries for the past few minutes. But when I tried to open it, he clawed me."

"Well, we'll see what's the matter," summed up her husband, and pushing the cat on one side, he pulled open the drawer in question.

Immediately there was a sharp hiss, and the ugly black head of a snake shot up through the opening!

While Sonia screamed—she couldn't help it—Tiger swore.

"My God!" he exclaimed.

"*Tiger!*" cried his wife in warning. But he had shut the drawer again before the reptile could use its poisonous fangs.

"You'd better leave this to me, my dear," he said, going to her. "I don't know how this has happened, of course, but you've got to thank old Dick there for something—well, something very unpleasant not happening to you."

"What are you going to do?—it may be poisonous; it looked like one of those dreadful Black Mambas we saw at the Zoo the other day. You remember that the keeper told us that a bite from such a snake was inevitably fatal."

"Get my revolver!" was the answer. "And tell Benny I want him."

TIGER STANDISH STEPS ON IT

"Pull the string, Benny," ordered his master.

The drawer flew open, the black, ugly head of the venomous snake was seen darting upwards—and then came the crack of a revolver.

"Good shot, guv'nor!" exclaimed Bannister in admiration; "but who was the dirty tyke who put it there? That's wot I want to know."

"Don't we all?" replied Standish. "Tell Mrs. Standish that lunch must be postponed for a few minutes whilst I have a talk with Merritt."

When the butler came into the room, he saw an angry and determined employer.

"I want to know, Merritt, who has been here this morning. Did anyone call? Any stranger, I mean?"

The butler shook his head.

"No, sir; no one called this morning."

"Then how do you account for a poisonous snake being found in that top drawer?"

The man's expression of bewilderment was so obviously genuine that the fleeting suspicion which had crossed Tiger's mind was instantly banished. He would have hated like hell to give more than a second's consideration to a trusted servant like Merritt having been a party to such a filthy action; but there had always been the faint possibility, of course.

"I don't understand it at all, sir," answered the butler. "I don't see how such a thing *could* have been done. No one—no stranger, that is—has even entered the room." And then, as a thought suddenly seemed to come to him: "There were the window cleaners, of course."

"Window cleaners?"

"Yes, sir. Carpenter's sent some men about half-past eleven, and said they had received instructions from madam herself to clean all the outside windows this morning."

"Mrs. Standish is too upset to be bothered now, but surely it's your job to send for the window cleaners?"

"Quite so, sir, but, as madam was out, I thought that possibly she had made an exception, and had telephoned Carpenter's herself."

"Well, so you let these men clean the windows, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you recognise the men?"

"No, sir—the man who seemed in charge explained that the firm had had a good deal of trouble lately and been obliged to take on some fresh hands, as he put it."

"Including, it would seem, the professional snake-charmer. All right, Merritt; that's all. And not a word about this to the rest of the staff, you understand?"

"Yes, sir . . . I'm sure I'm very sorry."

"It wasn't your fault; forget it."

"Yes, sir."

After Sonia had denied emphatically that she had got into touch by any means with the window-cleaning firm, Tiger and Benny went into conference.

"This is the lousiest trick yet," Standish said, "because, instead of attacking me, they've attacked my wife! My God, Benny, when I think of what might have happened . . ."

Bannister concurred.

"It's full speed ahead now, guv'nor," he replied, his own face reflecting the steel that he saw in his master's expression; "it's only a trick that a dirty dago like Carlimero *would* think of—let alone try to bring off."

Tiger curtly nodded; it was obvious that his mind was working rapidly.

"Get on to that window-cleaning firm and say I want to see the manager straight away, Benny! Don't be put off; tell him that a terrible accident has happened, if you like, and that I think of sending for the police."

So expeditious was the manager's arrival that he seemed almost to be at the house simultaneously with Benny replacing the telephone receiver. He listened with ever-increasing concern to Standish's astonishing story. At the end he took out his yesterday's handkerchief and wiped his steaming forehead.

"I need scarcely say, I hope, Mr. Standish, that I know nothing whatever about this? These men did not come to your house this morning by my orders—and I can't understand why they should have acted on their own."

"Let me ask you a few questions."

"Certainly, sir."

"Have you taken on any new men lately?"

The other hesitated.

"Come on, man; you heard my question."

"Well, Mr. Standish, we have—I don't know why it is but during the past few months we've found increasing difficulty in getting good cleaners. I suppose it's this rearmament business. They've all gone into munitions."

"What new men have you taken on recently?"

"Without referring to my books, Mr. Standish, I'm afraid I can't tell you."

If he had not been convinced that the fellow was speaking the truth, Tiger would have further cross-examined him. As it was, he contented himself with saying: "There's no doubt, I suppose, but what these window cleaners did come from your firm?"

The man looked freshly bewildered.

"I can't even tell you that, Mr. Standish; as I have already said, I gave no orders for any of our men to come to this house this morning. I need scarcely add, I suppose, how terribly sorry I am that this appalling thing should have happened?"

"It doesn't seem to be your fault," curtly replied Standish; "that's all, Mr. Smith; I won't keep you any longer."

The manager lingered.

"If this got into the papers, or even if the police were told—it might be the ruin of the firm," he said hesitatingly.

"You needn't worry," he was assured; "I intend to deal with this personally."

Still shaking his head in bewilderment, the manager left.

"Well, Benny?" said Tiger, turning to his servant when they were alone once again.

"It still beats me, guv'nor—at least, some of it does," was Bannister's reply; "of course, it's easy to see what 'appened once they got 'ere. They knew that you were out of the 'ouse—they must 'ave got word of that some'ow—and then, puttin' the ladder up at the back, opened one of the windows wide enough for one of their maggots to get into the room. Then, noticin' the desk with pens, etc., on it, Mister Maggot pushed that blinkin' snake in, feelin' certain that Mrs. Standish would open the drawer some time in the course of

the day. 'E must 'ave noticed she kept 'er stationery in it."

"Yes—there's no doubt you're right, Benny. The question is: what to do now?"

"What about givin' old Sir Harker a bit of work?" suggested Bannister. "It would make a bit of a change, anyway."

Standish shook his head.

"No, this is too-routine a job to bother Bellamy with; we must try to trace those swine ourselves. I don't feel like leaving the house after what has happened—it wouldn't be fair to my wife—but you might have a shot."

"Okay, guv'nor; but it's rather like lookin' for a blinkin' needle in a perishin' 'aystack, isn't it? Y'see, it's not very likely that those fellows are goin' to do any more window-cleanin'—not to-day, at any rate. Still, I've got an idear!" he went on quickly.

"Let's hear it."

"Well, guv'nor, in the course of me travels round this part of the globe I've found a little pub—it's off Shepherd's Market, as a matter of fact—where most of the window cleaners in Mayfair go for a drink; it's a sort of 'ome-from-'ome for that kind of feller, if you follow me."

"I'm following you all the way, Benny. Go on."

"I might 'ave a look-see in there and listen to a bit of chin-wag—what do you say?"

"I think it's a very excellent plan," he was instantly told; "now get off with you. You'd better take off that chauffeur's uniform though, and let me give the old face a bit of a disguise first. How do you fancy a beard again?"

Benny put up his hands in earnest entreaty.

"Not a beard again, guv'nor, for Gawd's sake," he pleaded; "I was afraid every minute last night I should be settin' meself on fire!"

"All right—we'll think of something else. Only we've got to be quick."



CHAPTER XII

BENNY THE SLEUTH

THE Three Crowns public-house in Taviton Street, Shepherd's Market, W.1, was packed with its usual luncheon-hour *clientele* when Benny arrived. Apart from his bowed legs, which were beyond the efforts of even his master to transform, he was a changed person from the smart alert-looking chauffeur who had driven the new Bentley to the West End shopping district that morning. Now he looked like one of those human derelicts who snatch a precarious livelihood by the various shifty means London offers to its down-and-outs. He was dressed in the shabbiest of suits, wore a neckerchief instead of a collar and tie, and had a greasy cap pulled down over one eye.

Pulling out a few coppers and looking at them as though weighing the value of each penny, he called for "'alf a pint of bitter, please, miss," and, secretly rejoicing at the look of disdain which the barmaid bestowed on him, he took the drink into a corner of the crowded room and looked out upon the concourse.

It was a typical London scene, very illustrative of that part of the Metropolis. The hangers-on of Mayfair—the touts, the servants of the rich, and the flotsam and jetsam which always gather, like so many mouldy human vultures, around a prospective feast—were present in force.

Benny paid little attention to them, apart from giving each man a sharp scrutiny; he was looking out for other game.

And; presently, the latter arrived. The first man of the party of four carried a ladder which could only belong to the window-cleaning fraternity. He was a sallow-visaged, furtive-looking creature, with what seemed a permanent leer. This man appeared to be on very good terms with himself as he exchanged whispered pleasantries with his nearest companion.

Benny felt the hair on the back of his head bristle. He

was very much like a terrier at that moment that had seen a rat. But, because caution was the essential thing, he kept in his corner, his greasy cap pulled well down over his eyes, and appeared solely intent on smoking his Woodbine and making his beer last as long as was possible.

The man with the ladder (which he placed against the wall up against the bar, much to the annoyance of the highly-decorative barmaid), called for four drinks and, looking round the place as though he owned it, took up a position at the end of the bar, whilst his companions seated themselves where they could.

Ten minutes passed. Benny was in a quandary. On the one hand, if he left his seat and went up to the bar for another drink, which his continued presence seemed to make necessary, he might by some misbegotten chance be recognised as Tiger Standish's servant, whilst on the other hand, he very urgently wanted to get near to this scum and hear what he was talking about.

The solution came in an unexpected way. Strolling into the Three Crowns came a tall, well-dressed man of middle age, who looked singularly out of place in that atmosphere of below-stairs strata.

Benny, watching him closely, saw him exchange a look with the furtive-faced leerer, and then, as though disappointed at not finding the person he expected to see in the Three Crowns, he left the public-house.

A couple of minutes went by, and then the man with the sallow face finished his drink, crossed the room, picked up his ladder and, after waving to his erstwhile companions, disappeared.

Benny, although twitching to follow, didn't do so until he considered a reasonable time had elapsed. In being so cautious, he knew he ran the risk of losing his quarry; but he had to take that chance.

Once outside the pub, he put a hand up to hide the habitual yawn of a man who didn't know how to occupy his time, and then casually took a look round.

Luck was with him. He felt he deserved it after getting himself up in that garb. On the opposite side of Taviton Street—a narrow thoroughfare—was a handsome car, and

seated at the wheel was the well-dressed man who had come into the Three Crowns shortly before.

This was important, but what was even more important was the fact that he was engaged in earnest conversation with the furtive-faced window cleaner! Almost afraid to breathe lest the spell be broken, Benny drew himself back into a doorway and watched.

Luck was again with him: he had his reward: after another minute or two, he saw the man in the car pull out a wallet, take from it something (notes?) and pass these to Furtive-Face. The latter leered, touched his hat and walked away, the ladder perched on his shoulder. The little cameo of London life was finished.

As the car started to glide away, Benny again found himself in a quandary. Should he attempt to follow it, or should he get on the trail of Furtive-Face? As the latter was merely the hireling, and not the employer, he decided to do neither. But, repeating the number of the car constantly to himself, he went by a devious route back to the house in Chapel Street and there reported the results of his work to his master.

Standish listened attentively to what he said. At the end, he got up energetically from his seat.

"I'm going along to see Bellamy," he announced; "meanwhile, I'll leave my wife in charge of you. Here's a revolver. It's fully loaded—don't hesitate to use it."

"Bet your sweet life, I won't, guv'nor," replied Bannister; "'ow long do you think you'll be?"

"Not long," was the crisp answer.

"H'm!" commented the Chief of Q.1; "this is serious."

"So serious that directly you have been able to trace that car, I intend to apply the closure so far as friend Carlimero is concerned. But listen, B., after what happened to-day, I can't leave my wife without a guard."

This was the Tiger Standish Bellamy knew of old; gone was the bantering manner, to be replaced by a steely determination.

"I'll see to that—from the moment you get back to the

CUT AND THRUST

house it shall be closely watched by my own men. But what do you intend to do?"

"I don't know yet—I shall wait for your telephone ring about the number of that car."

"Don't you want any help?"

"Not on this trip, old-timer! I intend to paddle my own canoe; this is purely a personal matter."

Bellamy sighed. He knew from experience that it would be perfectly useless for him to argue the point any further; once his mind was made up, Tiger was adamant.

"Well, good hunting," he said, as they shook hands.

The 'phone call came ten minutes after Tiger got back. Bellamy had been quick.

"The car in question—and perhaps this will not surprise you—belongs to a Professor Lablonde who lives at Fairlawns, Parkside, Wimbledon Common," the voice said over the telephone.

"Thanks a lot . . . and it *doesn't* surprise me!"

Tiger did not waste any time in further talk. Instead, he turned to Bannister who was standing near and clapped his servitor on the shoulder.

"My hunch proved correct, Benny, thanks to you," he said; "that car has been traced to the very house to which we followed Slug Carlimero last night."

"Now what?"

"We go there again to-night, Benny—and this time we get in!"

Bannister whistled.

CHAPTER XIII

CUT AND THRUST

PROFESSOR LABLONDE had called a special meeting of the Sons of Anubis for that night at nine o'clock sharp.

When every seat but one was occupied around the long conference table, he spoke as follows:

"Sons of Anubis, I have called you here to-night because it is time, I consider, that we took active measures against the tyrannical British Government. Something occurred last night which persuades me that spies have been sent to try to circumvent our operations. We must get the first blow in. Are you all agreed on that?"

From behind the masks over every face came a murmur of assent.

His face twitching frantically, Lablonde proceeded: "Now is a favourable time. England is rearming at a feverish rate, but according to the information I have had," and here he looked at the man seated on his left, "all her efforts will be in vain. Her puny attempts to guard herself against invasion will fall like a house of cards directly our friends from over the water decide the time is ripe to attack. And we, loyal Sons of Anubis, must play our own part; we can be the enemy within the gates. Now, with the help of enthusiastic coadjutors, I have worked out a plan for the complete destruction of every reservoir supplying the millions of London. The plans are here," pointing to some documents on the table before him. "If you are agreed, we will discuss ways and means immediately . . ."

The night was dull, and the threat of rain came from the low-hanging clouds overhead. As they stood in the shadows opposite the house into which they intended to penetrate, Benny Bannister and Tiger Standish watched a number of men walk in through the wide gate. Most of these came by car, the vehicles driving away after they had got out.

"Quite a gathering," commented Tiger, in a whisper; "it looks as though we're up against a tough job, Benny."

Bannister, throwing away the cigarette he had been smoking, gave a grunt.

"Well, I've made my will, guv'nor—I've left it all to the Dogs' 'Ome!"

"We'd better give them a little time to settle down, I suppose," was his master's next remark.

"I suppose so, guv'nor—but this waiting is like staying in the dressing-room before an international match."

"It can't be helped—and if you *must* smoke, hide the flame with your hands."

Thus reproached, Bannister resigned himself to one of the most uncomfortable twenty minutes he could remember. He lusted for action, even if he knew that Standish's strategy was sound.

At the end of that time, Tiger gave him a nudge and they strolled across the road and started to make a survey of the high wall surrounding the grounds. Then feeling that he was being watched by unseen eyes, he changed his tactics.

"Better see first of all what the back looks like," he said.

It took them a considerable time to discover where the back of "Fairlawns" actually was, and this second prospect was no more inviting than the first one. The wall here was high and topped with business-like spikes, in addition to nasty-looking fragments of broken glass.

"What do you think about nipping up it?" asked Standish.

The suggestion was emphatically turned down.

"Not in these trousers, guv'nor—it's eight feet at least, apart from the decorations at the top. A monkey couldn't get up there let alone a man."

"I don't know about that, Benny," said his master; and the speaker stepped back a few paces to make a survey. But, agile as he was, Standish was forced to turn the proposal down. As Bannister had said, it would require more than human skill to get over that obstacle.

"The only thing for it is to go in like a couple of Christians," he then remarked; "I wonder if there is anyone in that lodge?"

"We could always say that we've made a mistake in the dark," supported Benny.

"Come on—but keep your eyes skinned."

The lodge, which in days gone by might have been a coachman's cottage, proved to be inhabited. A man came out as they rang the old-fashioned bell.

"Yes—what is it?" he demanded surlily.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," replied Standish, "but I'm afraid my friend and I have lost our way. We're looking for a house called 'The Height.'"

The lodge-keeper, whose face in the darkness could scarcely be discerned, emitted a sound that might have been intended for merriment.

"Well, you've come to the right place—this is 'The Height.' And now what do you want?"

This might have been a nonplusser to the average individual, but Standish, already prepared, gave a ready reply.

"We're Scotland Yard officers," he said sternly, "and we have to make a few enquiries. Let me warn you to speak the truth—for it will be the worse for you if you tell us any lies. Now, then——"

And stepping forward, he unloosed a right swing that, if it had connected, would have put the lodge-keeper to sleep for several minutes; but as it was, the man, evidently on his guard, stepped quickly to one side, and blew a whistle.

A second blow put the lodge-keeper out of action, but even as he crashed to the ground, a number of men seemed to spring up from the very ground. Outnumbered three to one, Standish and Benny put up a fight that deserved to pass into history through both song and story, but it was hopeless from the beginning—especially as these thugs were armed with loaded sticks which they used with brutal force.

The last that Standish remembered was seeing what looked like a million stars dancing before his eyes.

Then came oblivion.

He awoke to a scene that might have formed the centre-piece in a horrible nightmare: bound hand and foot to a chair—the same fate had been meted out to Benny, he noticed—and with an armed man standing on his right, he found himself in a room filled with what in the circumstances bore every resemblance to ghastly exhibits. Prominent amongst these were a number of things that he recognised as mummy-cases. He wondered fleetingly if his body, when the enemy had finished with it, was destined to be placed in one of these. . . .

Nor was this all: in front of him was a long table placed in the middle of this huge room, and round this were eleven

figures, all dressed in curiously ornate robes and all wearing a hideous mask, fashioned like the head of a hawk.

A man began to speak in a reedy voice, which was tremulous with excitement.

"You came here at your own risk, Mr. Standish, and with the obvious intention of prying into our secrets," this voice said. "You thought you were clever, but I also had my spies out. You did not stop to consider, perhaps, that the beggar who asked you for coppers to buy a bed as you turned into Parkside to-night was one of my own watchers. He telephoned to me from an adjoining telephone kiosk, and so we were prepared. The question now is: what is to be your fate—and the fate of the other man you were imprudent enough to bring with you here to-night? We, the Sons of Anubis, had in the past a Court of Justice which dealt fairly and impartially with those who incurred our just wrath. Enemies though you are of our Cause, you too shall be judged fairly and impartially. For years, according to the information I have received, you have been a paid spy for the loathsome British Government."

At this Tiger felt bound to make a comment.

"Not 'paid,' my dear fellow," he said in a pained tone; "I've always been an amateur. Please be accurate."

At the sound of the drawling voice, which contained no suggestion of fear, a murmur of anger issued from the other men seated round the long table. It was stilled by the original speaker uplifting his hand.

"It is a matter of no interest to me whether you were paid for your despicable duties or not," he retorted, his reedy voice now scarcely audible through the excitement riding it; "the only point of importance is whether my information is true. Answer!"

"Well, since you want to know, I certainly have done a job of work now and then for the British Intelligence," he replied; "I don't know if there is a gentleman here by the name of Carlimero hiding himself behind one of those damn-awful masks, but he will bear out what I say."

"Strewth, guv'nor, be careful!" breathed Benny from his left.

"Your associate does well to warn you to be cautious,

Mr. Standish," went on the speaker; "yet I am glad you have been so frank with me. That makes the matter so much simpler. It was in the course of your duties as an agent of the British Secret Service, I am informed, that you were responsible for the fiendish death of many honest men—including the illustrious Dr. Guiseppe Carlimero."

In spite of his precarious position, Tiger felt compelled to laugh. Where was all this hocus-pocus leading? And what was the sense of it? If Carlimero was present—as he most probably was—why didn't he come out into the open, and not leave all the speechifying to the present freak?

"You knew Dr. Carlimero?" he put to the speaker.

"I know his son—that is sufficient," he went on.

"Have it your own way—but I must tell you, just for the sake of historical accuracy, as it were, that your view of the 'illustrious Dr. Carlimero,' as you have called him, is just so much absolute punk. He was a hound, and he deserved all that he got."

At this challenging taunt, several of the men round the table rose in their chairs. It looked very nasty and Tiger wondered if he had gone too far. He'd have to try to control himself, if only for Benny's sake, although he didn't suppose it would make a ha'porth of difference in the end.

"Enough! I will not hear any more! It is sufficient that you have admitted being guilty of the many crimes—including this heinous one of murder—with which you are accused. I, who will shortly be crowned Pharaoh of Egypt——"

An audible voice broke in. It belonged to Benny Bannister.

"Excuse me buttin' in, guv'nor, but is this gentleman crackers?"

"Silence! If I hear another word from you I will have you killed straightaway," promised Reedy Voice.

"You've heard the answer, Benny," commented Standish. "Have you quite finished, sir?" he enquired in a polite tone; "because if you have I should like to say a few words myself."

"I will hear nothing!" was the answer; "you have convicted yourself out of your own mouth."

Standish yawned.

"I must say, I'm getting rather tired of this blasted boloney," he remarked; "and, just in case you think of doing anything foolish, either with regard to myself or my companion, I would remind you that this house is already under suspicion. As a matter of fact, just between ourselves," he went on in a conversational tone, "I was talking only this afternoon about you, Professor Lablonde——"

"You know my name?"

"Of course! What use should I be to the British Intelligence if I didn't know a simple thing like that?" came the counter.

A fresh murmur of voices arose.

"Let us waste no further time, Professor," said the man seated on the speaker's left; "why use up your energies attempting to argue with such a swine-dog? He is dangerous to us and therefore must be killed!"

"You heard what the kind gentleman said, Professor," put in the chief prisoner; "why waste your energies in talking a lot of further hooey? And," straining at his bonds, "let me tell you this: if I'm not out of this place, safe and sound, within thirty minutes, the house will be raided by my Chief's men—and then you'll join your other friends, the mummies, Mister Bloody Pharaoh!"

Foam showed on the other man's lips; he looked as though he was about to have an apoplectic fit.

"If what you say is true you will be dead before these men arrive!" he choked. "Take them away!" He pointed with a quivering finger to the door. "Not only will you die," he added, "but you will have torture added to your death—many tortures! Torture of the Hook—the torture of Steam—the torture of——"

"Oh, for God's sake, talk sense, you crumbling ruin!" flung back the prisoner; "you're as crazy as a coot!"

"You shall suffer for that!" Lablonde flung up his hands as though he were a prophet of old letting loose a curse on one of his recalcitrant followers.

By this time Tiger was tired of the game; there was no fun arguing with such a fool.

And it was the man seated on Lablonde's left who now took the chief part in the proceedings.

"We're wasting time," he said sharply.

"I quite agree, my dear Herr Greisner," replied the Professor; "this man is insolent instead of being penitent."

Ignoring the speaker, Standish turned to the masked figure standing at the top left of the table.

"Herr Greisner, eh?" he commented. "That name somehow strikes a familiar chord—it sounds very Ronstadtian to me."

"It is Ronstadtian, you swine!" roared the other.

"I thought I wasn't mistaken; you have all the ingratiating characteristics of your endearing race, my dear Herr Greisner!"

The man to whom he spoke turned to Lablonde.

"I will take charge from now on," he said; "allow me to deal with this in my own way."

"So long as I am sure that the man dies." And Lablonde, looking as though he were on the verge of a physical collapse, sank back into his chair.

The other man Tiger now knew must be a high-up official in the Ronstadtian Espionage Corps in London, produced a revolver.

"I'm afraid, my friend, Standish, that your game is finished," he said viciously.

"Better wait for the final whistle, mate," said Benny Bannister—and was rewarded by the armed guard standing on his left bending down and striking him over the mouth with the butt of his revolver. Blood gushed from the wound.

"Strewth!" spluttered the victim; "if ever I get my 'ooks on you, you perisher, you'll know it!"

"Take them away!" ordered Greisner, and immediately a number of the men seated at the table rose, and gathered round the two prisoners.

Resistance was useless, bound as they were; and they were hustled away, at the point of the revolver.

When the heavy door had closed behind them, Lablonde roused himself from his momentary stupor. He stared around.

"Where is the man Standish?" he demanded of Greisner. The latter paid no attention.

This disregard sent Lablonde into a fit of fury.

"You have acted without my permission!" he cried.

"Don't be a fool!" was the next shattering retort; but Lablonde, seized by a fresh attack of egomania, became even more infuriated.

"You Ronstadtian dog!" he screamed; "how dare you try to defy me? Am I not head of this Society?—are not all the rest of you sworn to give me your allegiance?—yes, even to the death? I demand to know what has happened to the man Standish and his companion—they are mine to torture or to kill just as I please!"

"I've ordered them to be taken to the cellars," was the reply, evidently given under the severest self-restraint.

"You had no right to do that! Bring them back here!"

The man to whom he addressed the words suddenly leaned over and hit the speaker across the mouth. It was not a heavy blow, but Lablonde reeled before it; and, before he could recover himself, Greisner had picked him up in his arms and carried him bodily from the room. When he returned, a few minutes later, he said to those who were still left in the Council Chamber: "It is time that that lunatic realised who is the real master; I have had enough of this nonsense. From now on, I—I, you understand—am the only one here to give orders."

"That is very interesting, Herr Greisner," commented a voice. It came from a man who had just entered the room—a man Greisner was able to recognise instantly as Major Vincento Carlimero.

"Why—'interesting'?" he retorted.

"Because," said the other in a sneering tone, "it ignores completely my own interests in this house and all that goes on here."

This was a challenge, and Greisner replied to it. He knew he had to, otherwise his authority with his own agents present would suffer.

"If you have any objection to what I have said, I recommend that you make it in another quarter; personally, I am not prepared to listen, Signor Carlimero."

The contemptuous words made the other shake with rage.

"Now is not the time," he said, snarling each word, "to settle what is between us, but——" With an obvious effort he kept himself from saying anything further.

"On the contrary, now *is* the time to have a clear understanding, Signor Carlimero," went on Greisner; "you heard what I said just now; I am master here—just as my glorious Leader is the master of that puny, ridiculous puppet, Brassiano!"

A slow intake of breath, followed by a sharp hissing sound, was Carlimero's only answer. But his attitude denoted an almost overwhelming desire to kill this man.

"I'm glad to notice that you appreciate the true position, Carlimero," wound up Greisner; "and now, for your information, I will tell you what has happened here to-night: Tiger Standish with a companion—his servant, I believe—tried to get into this house; they were caught, tied up, and brought here, so that the old fool Lablonde could have his crazy desire satisfied. He started to give them a lunatic kind of trial, but then my patience was exhausted and I took control. Lablonde protested, and I hit him over the mouth. At this moment he is locked in another room, and if he doesn't keep his mouth shut I'll shoot him. It was obvious even to you, I suppose, that the time was rapidly approaching when he would have to be disposed of?"

Carlimero, conscious that the eyes of all in the room were on him, bowed ironically.

"It is as you say, my dear Herr Greisner; even I realised that! In fact, I made the same remark a couple of nights ago in this very room."

The two eyed each other like a couple of dogs preparing to fight.

CHAPTER XIV

THE KNIFE

"PITY those wine-racks are empty, Benny," commented Standish.

His fellow-prisoner agreed—mournfully.

"Yes, guv'nor, if they was as full of bottles as they ought to be, we might be able to forget ourselves—that is, if we could only get our 'ands free!"

"Cheer up, Benny!"

"I *am* cheerin' up, as the bloke said to the 'angman," was the reply.

"Very appropriate!" agreed Standish; "hangman and ropes—I wish those devils hadn't tied me quite so tightly," he went on.

They were silent after this; each was occupied with his own thoughts. Standish was thinking of the agony of mind that his wife was probably enduring at that moment, whilst Benny—perhaps it was the intense cold of his prison house working on his liver—could not help concluding that at long last an end had come to the adventures he had shared with his beloved master.

He shivered.

"Cold?"

"Perished, guv'nor—can't you 'ear me teeth rattlin'?"

"I'm sorry for this, Benny—I ought to have come alone."

"Forget it! Am I complainin'?"

"No, you're too good a sport for that, Benny . . . Hullo! What's that?"

The disused wine cellar—for this was apparently where they had been taken—had no illumination, but some faint light came in through the tall, barred window high up above the ground. Evidently the moon had risen. The noise to which Tiger had referred had come from the direction of this window, and, cautioning Benny to be quiet, he wriggled his bound body, which had been flung to the stone floor like a sack of coals, forward until he was beneath the window.

It was a grotesque performance, but very praiseworthy in the circumstances.

In spite of the command to be quiet, Benny could not help asking a question after he had heard Standish make an exclamation of mingled surprise and delight.

"What is it, guv'nor?" he enquired.

"A knife!" was the whispered answer; "somebody must have pushed it through the bars of that window!"

"But, blimey—*who*?"

"Don't waste time asking damned silly questions! Isn't it enough that it's here?"

"It would be," said Bannister, "if one of us could only use it."

He watched Standish working furiously at the ropes which bound his hands behind him.

"Want any 'elp, guv'nor?" he proffered.

"One day, Benny, I shall knock you over your wooden head!" came back the answer. "*Ah-h!*"

Bannister ignored the rebuke in his admiration at seeing that Standish had accomplished the seemingly impossible. Another few moments, and Tiger had both his hands free.

"A Greek sailor taught me that trick, Benny," he explained. "But I was afraid that I shouldn't be able to bring it off. However——"

Within another couple of minutes, both men were free of their bonds. The knife, which had been so providentially slipped through the barred window, was a very serviceable affair of the Swedish type, and could—as Benny was quick to point out—be used as a dagger if the chance offered itself.

Standish nodded. The loss of their revolvers—for each had come prepared for the worst—had irked him grievously. Then a step outside put an end to their conferring.

"Quick, Benny—on the floor; leave this to me!" he whispered.

Bannister instantly obeyed; he would just as quickly and without question, have stood on his head if Standish had ordered him to do so. He watched his master pick up a heavy wooden stool, which was the only piece of furniture in the place, and dive towards that part of the wall which would be shielded by the door when the latter opened.

A key grated in the lock and the door swung inwards. Benny, pretending to be still stunned, was able to see beneath the shadow of his hand a man's figure outlined.

"Come on, get up!" rasped a voice. The owner, walking forward, gave the prostrate Bannister a brutal kick.

What followed was both dramatic and spectacular: in the same instant as Bannister grabbed the man's legs, Tiger swung his heavy stool down on the fellow's head. The blow cracked his skull as though it had been an egg-shell, and he collapsed like a drunken man deprived of any support.

"Regrettable—but he certainly asked for it!" commented Standish; "how do you feel, Benny?"

"A.I. at Lloyds," was the answer, springing to his feet. "My God, guv'nor, you didn't 'alf bash 'im one!" surveying the wreckage.

"We've got to get out of here," was the answer and, forthwith, he led the way.

They found themselves in a long, stone-flagged passage from which several doors led upwards. Selecting one of these flights of stone steps, they came out, after a while, near a large hall that was filled with curios. What was evidently the front door of the mansion lay to the right. Tiger, going to it, was about to push back the top heavy bolt, when he suddenly hesitated. Then he turned quickly to see Bannister fling himself, Rugby-football fashion, at a man dressed as a butler.

He watched admiringly Benny's work, which was done quickly and efficiently; before the man could give any warning cry, he had been suffocated into insensibility.

"If this goes on, you know, guv'nor, I shall match myself with you in the World's 'Eavy-Weight All-In Stranglin' do," commented Bannister, with characteristic dry humour as he rose to his feet. "Lucky I caught sight of that blighter; 'e came snoopin' round the corner, and was just about to open 'is trap when I let 'im 'ave it!"

"You did the job very well, Benny," was his master's encomium.

"Never mind about that now, guv'nor; it strikes me

we've got to get off—and there,” pointing to the big door, “is the way out!”

To his surprise Standish shook his head.

“It's not nearly so simple as that, Benny, I'm afraid,” he returned.

“Oh! Why not?”

“Because, unless I'm very much mistaken, and I don't feel inclined to put it to the test, that door is guarded by electric rays. See that funny little contrivance by the side?”

“Guv'nor, you're dreamin'!”

“Well, I don't think either of us would dream much longer if we put our hand on any part of that door; these people are cleverer than I imagined. Besides, now that we're in the place and more or less free agents, I think we ought to make a few investigations—don't you?”

Benny hid his disappointment with a smile that would have been viewed with professional pride by any self-respecting undertaker's mute.

“Jes' as you like, guv'nor,” he answered; “in for a penny, in for seven years, as the fellow said when they bunged 'im in Dartmoor.”

“I'm glad you agree with me,” commented Standish; “and I think this gentleman will be able to oblige now that he seems to be feeling better.”

Walking forward, he picked up the prostrate butler by the collar of his coat, and dragged him to his feet.

“Now, listen, my friend,” he said. “You have just one chance to save your life—but only one. You see this?” showing the blade of the Swedish knife, “well, you'll have this in a very vital part of your anatomy unless you do exactly what I want you to do. Don't talk—just nod. Begin your nodding now.”

This was very eloquent language, and that it penetrated to the mind of the listener was evident by the vigorous movement of his head he made.

“Good! Now, there is a meeting being held in this house to-night, I believe. If so, nod!”

The man nodded.

“Good again! You're evidently quite a bright fellow.

Where is that meeting being held? Don't nod this time, just point."

The man under interrogation began to hesitate.

"As you see there is six inches of this blade . . . nod!"

The man nodded.

"All right! It's clear that you are familiar with your part. Now I want you to show my friend and me the way to that meeting. I shall be behind you with this rib-tickler all the time—so don't attempt any funny tricks. Understand?"

The man nodded.

"One cry, and you'll have the daylight let into your liver—or maybe one of your kidneys. Either won't be very pleasant, let me assure you. *Nod!*"

The man nodded.

"You won't say a word, you understand—if we should meet anybody on the way, you will not attempt to cry out. *Nod!*"

The man nodded.

"Fine! You understand everything. That's grand! Now lead the way!"

With the knife ready for instant action, Tiger, his right shoulder resting gently against the door, listened intently.

The Ready Nodder had fulfilled his necessary function—and was being repaid for it by having a gag placed over his mouth, "jes' in case of accident," as Benny obligingly informed him.

Considering the risks that were in waiting, the two adventurers had been very fortunate; contrary to what Tiger expected, they had not encountered a single other servant, or member of the Masked Brotherhood.

Walking as delicately as the gentleman mentioned in the Bible, the butler had conducted them from the hall through a luxuriously-furnished room, and out into a narrow corridor, down another flight of stone steps, the entrance to which had been gained by means of a concealed opening in the floor. (Incidentally, Standish wondered to what use these various trap-doors could have been put by the original builder of the house, or had the crazy Professor

Lablonde put them in himself? Quite likely it was the madman's doings.)

Having reached the bottom of this second flight of steps, the butler pointed towards a door. As though to give double assurance to his action, he nodded.

"Thank you," said Tiger in a whisper; "and now because I don't want to run any further risks, I'm afraid that . . . Benny, you know what to do."

Benny answered by pulling out a large bandanna handkerchief from his pocket.

"Sorry, old cock," he whispered hoarsely; "but we've simply got to keep that trap of yours shut, y'know."

And now, with Bannister keeping guard over the gagged butler, Tiger was listening to the words that came to him from within the Council Chamber.

"I refuse to agree to any such suggestion," said a voice which he had no difficulty in recognising as belonging to Carlimero. (So friend Carlimero had now joined the happy throng!)

"It is not what you consent to do, but what I order!" This second voice the listener was able to place as belonging to the Ronstadtian native Lablonde had earlier in the proceedings addressed as "My dear Herr Greisner." (The situation was getting rather complicated. What were these two enemy spies arguing about? It would be interesting to know.)

"I must tell you once again that I protest in the strongest possible manner—this man Standish is my personal enemy, and it was agreed between us that he should be left to me." (Carlimero again. Such a nice gentleman!)

"Since then I have received further orders that cannot be disobeyed; these fresh instructions are that I take Standish myself to Menke. There are people there who are very anxious to see him. Under persuasion, he will no doubt be able to give us certain information we want. I regret, Signor Carlimero, that I cannot be more explicit." (This undoubtedly from Greisner.)

"In that case, I can but agree to your proposal," the listener heard Carlimero reply; "all the same I shall have to send my report to Brassiano."

"THE MOLE" BURROWS

If Standish could have looked into the speaker's mind at that moment, he would have been able to understand the Caronian's change of front. Carlimero had to pretend; surrounded as he was by agents of Greisner, he would stand no chance in a deliberate show-down. He knew this; and, being of a particularly crafty nature, he, therefore, had to assume a *rôle* which was distasteful, but which would bring him, he hoped, ultimate victory.

His quick brain showed him a way out: he would leave the house, ring up the authorities (Bellamy, if he could get him), and inform them—anonymously, of course—that a dangerous group of enemy agents was gathered there; that these men were holding Tiger Standish and his servant prisoners, and that if the police hurried, they would get a valuable bag. Any international complications that might result, would be to Greisner's discomfiture and not his own. Yes, it was a good plan, and he had difficulty in concealing his sense of satisfaction.

"I'm glad you're being sensible, Carlimero," Greisner replied; "I shall leave by air for Menke at midnight. That is in a couple of hours' time."

Tiger moved silently away from his listening post. He had heard enough—more than enough. It was very kind of the good Herr Greisner to give him a free passage to the capital of Ronstadt, but he was afraid he would have to decline.

But, meanwhile, he knew he was in as tough a spot as any man could be.

CHAPTER XV

"THE MOLE" BURROWS

SIR HARKER BELLAMY could not keep his mind on his routine duties that afternoon. Whilst he knew that it would be a mere waste of time to try to prevent his favourite agent, Tiger Standish, from carrying out the plans he had

outlined, Bellamy in spite of his admiration for Standish, had a whole series of misgivings. The last thing he wanted was to lose the services of the man who had brought off so many brilliant *coups* for him, and he regretted that this Carlimero-Standish vendetta had resolved itself into such a personal affair. It was a sheer waste, he considered, to have Tiger risking so much in this particular instance. Even if he got the better of Carlimero—as he would in the end, without a doubt—there would still be no outstanding international gain achieved. And, as Chief of Q.1. Department, it was the national interests that he always had to consider.

He had another reason for worry. He knew exactly how he stood with Sonia Standish; he knew that, much as she might admire the work he did for the nation, the very mention of his name was anathema to her because of the tasks he gave her husband from time to time. After the last brush with Rahusen—when Tiger had nipped in the bud a very daring attempt on the part of his old enemy to steal the plans of Britain's latest super-bomber—Sonia had humbled her pride and had appealed to him.

"It's time you gave Tiger a rest, Sir Harker," she had said, standing in that very room; "for years now, you have exposed him to all sorts of risks, and I'm getting more than tired of it. You seem to forget that he is a married man! One would also imagine that Tiger was the only agent you had in your Department. If this sort of thing doesn't stop—and I feel I can no longer stand the strain—then I shall have to go to the Secretary of State himself and put the case to him. It's not a question of being a coward, or of being unpatriotic; it's a question of living continuously under an intolerable strain—you must see what I mean?"

He had nodded.

"I appreciate everything you say, my dear, and—even if you do not believe me—I can only tell you in reply that I am extremely sorry to have caused you all this anxiety."

"It's easy enough for you to save me that in the future," she had countered.

This time he did not nod. How could he explain to a woman—and a woman who was happily married—how,

when certain sudden emergencies arose, he was bound to call on the one man in whom, more than in any other, he had complete confidence that the work required would be done?

Instead, he had compromised.

"I have my work to do, Mrs. Standish, and those who have put me in charge of this Department—and the men in question include the Secretary of State himself—rely upon me to do the best I can. That means, in turn, that I have to call upon the best available material—and I need scarcely tell you, I suppose, that by that term, I refer to your husband?"

She gave a cry.

"But it isn't fair! You call on him too often! I'm a patriot, and I don't want to stand in his way, because I know how keen he is on working for you, whatever he may say to the contrary, but there is a limit and I want you to observe that limit now. Tiger has worked brilliantly, ungrudgingly for you for years——"

It had touched his heart to watch her distress.

And so this time, he had done a little more than compromise. He had determined to take the field himself; to share what risks there might be in this adventure equally with his agent.

He had been actuated by more than one reason in coming to this resolve; his pride had been touched by what Sonia Standish had said to him in that interview; she had inferred that, whilst he skulked in his office, her husband had had to face perils all by himself. Well, he might be decrepit in years compared with Standish, but there was life in the old dog yet. And that night he would show it.

And so, unbeknown to anybody—as a matter of fact, his staff were already seriously overworked in view of the present situation—he had gone to the house at Wimbledon, equipped with a telescopic ladder, a knife, a revolver, and a flashlight. An old campaigner, he had been able to elude the guard, the members of which he had seen scattered about, and, fixing his ladder, he had nipped up it with an agility that even Tiger Standish would have envied.

Once in the grounds he knew he must be cautious; there

might be any number of death-traps lying about. But, again exercising caution, he had been able to reach the house without any mishap. It was whilst he was lying flat on his stomach practically overlooking the barred window of what might once have been a wine cellar, that he was startled to hear the unmistakable tones of Benny Bannister's voice!

So Tiger had lived up to his word—what a fool he would have been had he doubted him! He had gone to this house, as promised, had taken Benny with him—and now, it seemed, both were prisoners!

His first impulse, of course, was to make his presence known, but many years' exercise of rigid self-restraint had stopped him from talking. There might be guards in that prison-house.

He had done the best thing possible, taking the Swedish knife from his pocket, fixing the blade, and letting it slip through the barred window. If Tiger and Benny were in desperate straits, this might be very useful.

That done, he was forced temporarily to leave his post, for close behind him, he heard the slithering steps of a night prowler. It must be one of the guards.

Back in the Council Chamber, Carlimero lived up to his word. Somewhat to his surprise, he was allowed to go, Greisner raising no objection to his departure. Greisner evidently had so much contempt for the Caronian that it did not matter to him what the man did; at any rate, that was what could be adduced from his manner.

But directly the man who had seen Carlimero leave by the back door, returned, his attitude completely changed.

"Now that that swine-dog has gone," he declared, with brutal frankness, "I don't mind saying that what I told him just now was a lie! I have had no fresh orders from Strasser; I said that I had received instructions to take Standish to Menke because I was determined to show my superior authority. I know that Carlimero has sworn to kill Standish himself, but I am going to beat him to it!"

A chorus of voices told him that the manœuvre was popular with his hearers; and if Carlimero could have

heard those voices, he would have been convinced he had been correct in his surmise that the longer he stayed in that room, the shorter might have been his life; the Axis would have creaked very badly. . . .

Greisner wasted no further time.

"Platz, and you, Seltzmann, will do the job!" he ordered; "go down into the cellar, shoot Standish and his servant, and then report back to me. I will decide later what is to be done with the bodies; probably their heads will be cut off, the carcasses divided—and the whole lot burned. In any case, neither of them must be traced; that would be too stupid."

The two Ronstadtian agents who had been selected for this grim task, smiled behind their masks. It had been gall and wormwood to them to have to take orders from Carlimero; and, although they had been discreet at earlier meetings in this house, they had longed passionately for the time when Herr Greisner, their real chief, would come out into the open.

Giving the Ronstadtian national salute, they started on their grisly commission.

"Benny, my lad," said Tiger in an urgent whisper, "it's time we got back to our cellar cool!"

Bannister, who had been watching the gagged butler with the same close interest that a *chef* might have taken in a turkey that he was about to put in the oven, almost gave a cry in his surprise.

"You 'aven't gone nuts, 'ave you, guv'nor?" he managed to send back hoarsely.

"Certainly not! I never felt more sane in my life—sane, but oh! so determined! That's why I'm telling you we've to get back to our beautiful cellar home!"

Benny shook his head.

"I wish I was better educated, guv'nor," he retorted; "sometimes I can no more understand wot you say than if you were speaking Eskimo."

"Well, get this, Benny," replied his master; "as the result of a further spell of listening-in," motioning towards the door of the Council Chamber, "I have just learned the

interesting information that too thugs are being specially instructed to pay a visit to that same cellar, shoot us on sight, and then report back for further instructions!"

"Blimey!"

"Blimey, it is, Benny. But you see the point, I feel sure; if we aren't in that cellar, then general confusion will arise; nasty questions will be asked, a rigorous search started, and as we don't know any way out of this hole except by doors which are guarded by electric rays, then the obvious course is to go back the way we came."

It was a severe test of Benny's loyalty, but, although he started shaking his head again much after the fashion of a dog that has just come out of the water following a swim, he raised no further demur. He had no wish to be shot, either in a cellar or above ground, but he had sufficient faith in Tiger to know, now that he had recovered somewhat from the first violent surprise, that Standish must have had a very good purpose in saying what he did.

"But wot about 'im?" he enquired, just before the procession started out, pointing to the gagged butler.

"Is he still unconscious?" asked Standish.

"Ar! But he's still breathin'. Shall I . . .?"

Tiger shook his head.

"Shoot a sitting bird, Benny—for shame!" he expostulated. "No, put him behind that screen—it's a chance, of course, but then this seems to be our night for taking chances."

This done, the two returned quickly to their former prison.

As the door swung inwards, Tiger hurled himself straight at the first man. If there had been any illumination in the cellar, the results might not have been quite so satisfactory, but, naturally enough, anybody expecting to walk in upon two bound figures, might reasonably be surprised if one of the figures suddenly grabbed him about the knees and brought him to the stone floor with a resounding thud. He would have been even more surprised, perhaps, to find the life being choked out of his throat with a pair of hands, the fingers of which seemed to be made of steel.

A STRANGE PACT

Meanwhile, Benny, looking something like a human badger, had been busy on his own account. He had used the knife. . . . Now the handle could be seen sticking out of the throat of the Second Assassin and presenting every appearance of a workmanlike job.

"Very neat, Benny!" whispered Standish. "Very neat indeed! What I want you to do now is to put on that fellow's mask and cloak. We are bound for the higher regions again."

Bannister, whose nerve had been slightly upset by the thought that, for the first time in his life, he had killed a fellow being, hesitated.

"You heard what I said, Benny," he said; "put on that man's mask and cloak."

After that, of course, there was nothing more to be said.

CHAPTER XVI

A STRANGE PACT

USING all the guile of a Red Indian scout, Bellamy, who had learned most of the tricks whilst on active service as a spy in various parts of Europe, waited until the prowler had vanished—it seemed for good—and then returned to his former post. Twenty minutes or so had passed.

As he returned, he heard the sound of two revolver shots. They came from inside the cellar.

"The Mole" felt his heart threaten to stop. Tiger dead! The thought was prostrating. Especially after that recent talk with Sonia Standish. What on earth could he tell the girl? What excuse could he possibly give? Even if he explained that her husband had come to this house of his own free will, she would still condemn him as a murderer.

Hell . . . !

The inside of the cellar was as black as his hat; the moon, which had been a danger to him before, had now disappeared—and he cursed its coyness.

But this much was certain: somehow or other, he would have to get into that house and find out the worst. If Tiger had been killed, he would have every swine in the place rounded up and charged jointly with the crime.

It was whilst he was debating how best he could achieve this, that Bellamy's abnormally keen ears caught a suspicious sound. Still flat on his stomach, he turned to his left—and there, coming round a corner of the house, he saw a man. The latter was evidently intending to pass through the grounds and leave by the front gate.

As the man drew nearer, Bellamy, in spite of the gloom, was able to recognise him.

Carlimero!

He sprang quickly to his feet.

"Put your hands up, my friend!" he said urgently, thrusting the revolver he held in the direction of the other's stomach.

The Caronian started back.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded hoarsely.

"My name is Bellamy—you may have heard it," was the answer.

To "The Mole's" complete surprise, the other, instead of maintaining his present belligerent attitude, completely changed.

"The very person I wanted to see!" he said astoundingly; "I haven't time now to tell you the whole story, but your friend, Mr. Standish, and his servant, are being kept prisoners back there," pointing towards the house.

Was this a trick? It must be—how could a fellow like Carlimero be expected to play straight with a man he knew to be an enemy?

"Is that so?" Bellamy commented, intending to reserve judgment. "Due to you, no doubt?"

The other shook his head.

"No, Sir Harker," was his reply; "I admit that I had no good feelings towards Mr. Standish—in fact, I'll go further and say that in my own time, I intend to get my revenge on him for having killed my father—but that time is not yet. The reason I left that house a few minutes ago was because I absolutely refused to take any part in the later proceedings;

believe me or not, Bellamy," he went on in a more urgent tone, "but unless Standish is rescued from"—he shrugged—"well, perhaps I had better not mention any names, he will very quickly be a dead man——"

"I'm afraid he's that now," broke in his listener.

Carlintero, even at the risk of being shot, reached out a hand and caught the older man by the shoulder.

"Shot!" he retorted; "what do you mean?"

Bellamy shook himself free.

"Keep your hands off me, my friend," he warned; "because this gun is quite likely to go off—and without any further warning. As for your question, I meant exactly what I said—I heard two shots come from inside that cellar, outside of which I have been watching for some time, and, as I heard the voice of Mr. Standish's servant speaking from there some time back, I naturally concluded that by some mischance Standish and Bannister had been taken prisoners and placed in that hole. Am I right?"

"You are right in one respect, Sir Harker," replied Carlintero, whose eyes were gleaming like a cat's in the darkness; "but if they have already been shot . . .! *Supristi!*" he broke off, "it means that Greisner has double-crossed me!"

"Greisner! H'm!"

"Yes, Greisner, the barbarian," retorted the Caronian fiercely; "he told me back there just before I left that he had had instructions to take Standish over to Menke, and that he would start his flight at midnight to-night. He's a liar! Directly my back was turned, he told his men to murder Standish. Now you have the truth, Bellamy!" he wound up.

Bellamy did not reply for some seconds. He was busy thinking. Was this, after all, the truth that he had been told? Certainly it bore some resemblance to it.

"Why did you allow Greisner to beat you in this way?" he probed.

The other almost shrieked in his rage.

"Had I any choice? The place was full of Ronstadtian agents—yes, you may as well know it: this house has been used as a meeting-place for Greisner and his men. There

is a fool called Lablonde living here; he is crazy—and they have taken advantage of his madness. He wants to become a modern Pharaoh—the absurdity of it! And, as I have said, Greisner has humoured him so that he can meet his spies here without attracting any notice. Lablonde is a famous Egyptologist.”

“You needn’t say any more,” replied Bellamy, now convinced that, if through no other cause, jealousy had forced the truth out of the speaker’s lips.

“So you were one against a crowd, eh?” he went on.

“Yes,” with a fresh oath, “I stood alone! It may amuse you, Sir Harker, to know a little more of the truth—there is not the harmony between my country and Ronstadt that the world thinks exists!”

“Really! You surprise me,” came the dry comment; “judging by your distinguished leader-writer, Signor Crispi, the mouthpiece for Brassiano, you and Greisner should be in each other’s arms, pinning medals on each other’s breasts! But now,” breaking off and speaking seriously, “I have to get into this house—and it is you who will show me the way.”

“Do you wish me killed?”

“No, I’m not exactly wanting you to be put away just yet,” was the reply, “but I’m certainly not going to permit that chance to stop me doing my duty. Look here, Signor Carlimero, I believe you’ve been telling me the truth——”

“I swear it!”

“Never mind about swearing it; what more or less convinces me is that I already knew you and Greisner to be at loggerheads. Now, I have a suggestion to make: will you for to-night only be a friend instead of an enemy?”

Thus appealed to, the Caronian struck an attitude.

“On my mother’s honour, I promise it!” he returned; “but for to-night only. You and I, Bellamy, can never be anything but enemies, because of the blood that has been shed.”

“Very well! We’re enemies—but not at the moment. It is an old British custom, Carlimero, and you, in your

superior Totalitarian way, may laugh at it—but we will shake hands on it.” And he held out his hand.

The Caronian immediately seized it.

“On my mother’s honour,” he repeated.

CHAPTER XVII

GREISNER LOSES HALF AN EAR

“BLIMEY, guv’nor, we’ve joined the Buffaloes!”

Even with the prospect of his world crashing down upon him in ruins at any moment, Benny Bannister could not restrain his normal nature.

“Yes, and you look fine as Chief What-Not,” returned Standish, falling into his mood; “but now there’s work to be done, my lad. No more nonsense!”

“What’s the big idear?” returned Benny, his voice sounding ludicrous behind the mask which he had fixed with some difficulty; “I ’aven’t bothered you with any questions up to now, but I must say——”

“I know, Benny; you imagined I’d gone crackers just now, didn’t you, when I said that we had to go back to the cellar? You’ll probably think I’m still more crackers when I say that we’ve got to go upstairs again—for, don’t you see, we’re sitting pretty now: we’re holding some of the aces! I fired those two revolver shots just now to let anybody who might be listening for them, think that you and I had been happily despatched. Instead of which——” and he pointed to the two figures at their feet. “I’m rather sorry we had to croak those fellows—but there was no other way,” he mused as though speaking to himself, and then, in a much brisker tone, he continued: “Well, we shall have to step on it, Benny.”

Upstairs, in the big Council Chamber, Greisner was openly gloating over his victory.

“That’ll show Carlimerero where he stands,” he said, and

the remark was greeted with sycophantic applause from his listeners.

"What about the old man, *mein Herr*?" enquired one of the latter.

"He'll be all right—I knocked him cold!" was the brutal reply. "And if he dares to show any further temper, he'll be finished off for good!"

The door opened. Two figures wearing the customary cloaks and masks entered.

"It has been done, *mein Herr*," declared the taller of the two; "it was easy; they weren't expecting us!" And the speaker laughed.

"Well done, Platz," returned Greisner; "and what about you, Seltzmann?" now turning to the second figure.

A nudge in the ribs told Benny to be quiet and leave the talking alone.

"Seltzmann played his part well," replied Tiger Standish, still speaking in the guttural tones of the supposed Platz. "He is a good servant of the Fatherland, and a faithful disciple of our beloved Leader!" With that, hoping that he might be forgiven, Standish flung up his right hand in the Ronstadtian national salute.

"You didn't see that damned Caronian, Carlimero, anywhere about?" was Greisner's next question.

"No, *mein Herr*."

"I just wondered if he had any suspicion of what was going to happen, that's all. Those damned Caronians are like foxes; but there's one thing," the speaker continued whilst again his sycophantic audience rocked with laughter, "like foxes, you can always tell them by their smell!"

"Well, now that the work is over, we can dispense with all this cursed mummary," went on Greisner; "off with your cloaks and masks, men!"

Benny heard the words with distinct disquietude—not to mention an alarming stomachic rumbling. Here was a very grandfather of a dilemma, and, whilst his faith was as strong as ever, he wondered how Tiger would get out of this fresh *contretemps*.

He was quickly answered.

"Yes, *mein Herr*—I shall be glad to get the muck off my

face," the man who was posing as the First Murderer declared—and then, with a movement that was as swift as it was unexpected, he brought out from beneath the cloak his revolver.

"I'll trouble everybody here to put up their hands," Standish said in a voice of steel; "and the quicker you do it, the more time you'll have on this earth! Step on it all of you!"

A second voice, different in enunciation, but equally determined in tone, supported the resolution.

"Yes, put 'em up, you lot of dirty tykes—the guv'nor means what he says, take my word for it!"

Standish!

As clearly as though he had uttered the name, the now unmasked face of the Chief of the Ronstadtian Secret Service in England mirrored its owner's astonishment.

"Sorry to disappoint you, my dear Herr Greisner," said Tiger; "but I had rather a rooted objection to being bumped off, and so I knocked off your couple of toughs. And now, I swear to God I mean it when I say that the slightest move from any of you here will mean an instant fade-out. . . . Go and collect their guns, Benny—they're sure to have some on them."

"Okay, guv'nor!" was the cheery response.

It was a sullen but cowed group of men who were dispossessed of their weapons.

"What shall I do with all this ironmongery, guv'nor?" enquired Bannister, his left arm full of revolvers.

"Dump it down in that corner and stand guard over it!" was the reply. "Wait a minute; give me another one first and keep a couple yourself."

"Okay, guv'nor."

Bannister displayed no more emotion than as though he had just received an instruction to drive his master to his club.

"And now, I think, I must ask you, my dear Herr Greisner, to switch off your patent burglar-alarm."

The Ronstadtian glared.

"Are you trying to be funny?" he retorted.

"There's nothing very funny about sudden death, my

friend—and you're asking for it every additional second that I allow you to live; you heard what I said: this place, I have already discovered, is guarded by a pretty ingenious system of electric rays. In fact, the front door is impassable through that account. Now then, step on it—either turn off the current yourself or get that old fool, Lablonde, to do it. I give you exactly two minutes—two minutes, you understand, and not a second longer!”

Greisner growled.

“I know nothing whatever about the current; that is Lablonde's secret,” he said.

“Then where is he?”

“In that other room,” pointing to the right.

“Send a man to fetch him!” was the next command.

Greisner made a sign to one of the men standing round.

“And before you go, listen to me,” said Standish; “any funny tricks, and this revered Chief of yours will be filled so full of lead that he'll rattle when he's buried. Understand?”

The scowling man, looking utterly discomfited, nodded.

“Then jump to it—tell Lablonde I want to see him.”

When the man had gone, Standish addressed another question to Greisner.

“By the way, I don't see your friend Carlimero here; where is he?”

“He went some time ago,” was the answer.

“Had another appointment, perhaps?”

“What should I know about his affairs?”

“Oh, but my dear Greisner, aren't you and he as thick as thieves—as thick as, say, Herr Kuhnreich and Signor Brassiano? Don't you both work for the Axis?”

“One day I'll tear you limb from limb for that insult!” shouted the Ronstadtian.

Tiger motioned with his gun.

“Now, now, keep a hold on that dirty tongue of yours, or I'll split it in two. I rather wanted to see Carlimero; he tried to kill my wife by means of a poisonous snake.”

He was surprised to hear Greisner laugh.

“You laugh at that?” Standish returned, his voice ominously calm; “but, then, you Ronstadtians have a very

perverted sense of humour, haven't you? You delight in torturing Jews and helpless women. Yes, you're a bum crowd."

This was too much for the other.

"It was I, not Carlimero, who sent that snake—and I'm only sorry it didn't do its work!"

Standish fired. Not to kill the man, although his soul was aching to do murder at that moment; but just to give vent in some measure to his feelings. The bullet tore through the Ronstadtian's left ear, ripping half of it away.

"The next time, it will be your left eye, Greisner. As it is, that ear will be a useful souvenir to take back to Menke; by the way, wasn't it your intention to take *me* back? At least, I seem to remember hearing something of the sort, when I was listening outside that door a short while ago?"

Greisner choked with rage.

"If only——" he choked, grinding his teeth.

"Ah, if only—but that's the trouble with Life, isn't it? The 'if onlys' are so often the snags. . . . Benny, you'd better go and see what's happening."

Bannister protested.

"Wot! Leave you 'ere with this gang of murderin' 'eathen! No, guv'nor, I couldn't think of it!"

"Benny, you'll do what I say!"

This time Bannister made no further demur.

"Don't any of you move," warned Standish.

"I've switched off the doin's, guv'nor," announced Bannister jubilantly, as he returned to the room a few minutes later, marshalling in front of him the man who had been sent to speak to Lablonde. "The old Prof.-bloke was as nice as pie about it; 'e said 'e only 'ad that burglar-alarm put in because 'e wanted to guard 'is blinkin' mummies . . . funny, that, don't you think, guv'nor?—as though anybody would want to steal those perishers!"

"Some people have funny tastes, Benny," retorted his master; "well now, gentlemen—I'm always prepared to be polite even when I'm dealing with scoundrels like your

charming selves; that is why I call you 'gentlemen'—it's time we made another move in this little game of ours. I want you now to line up in single file and——"

Benny interrupted.

"Am I to be the dustman, guv'nor?" he enquired.

"You are, Benny."

"Well, where's the rubbish-bin?"

Standish grinned.

"We shall find it somewhere downstairs, I've no doubt, and in any case, there's always the cellar. Of course, you gentlemen," turning to the Ronstadtian agents, "may find it a little crowded, especially as there are already two dead men inside, but in these difficult times, one can't be too particular. You have my apologies in advance, in case they are of any use to you."

The words brought an outburst from Greisner.

"I warn you, Standish," he choked explosively; "every word you say is being recorded in my memory, and will be added to the total."

"You'll want a pretty big slate, then."

"Silence, you dog! Herr Kuhnreich, my Beloved Leader, will exact a terrible vengeance on you when I tell him about this."

Tiger walked up to the man.

"You know, the trouble with your race, Greisner, is that you are such a curious combination of barbarian and simpleton. Even if the present situation were reversed, would you expect me to take that remark seriously? What you have to look out for, my repulsive friend, is not the terrible vengeance of your Beloved Leader, but the terrible vengeance of Timothy Overbury Standish. You've done enough already to justify my killing you on the spot. Do you realise that?"

The man remained silent. But the foam-specks on his lips told of his inward turmoil.

Standish turned away.

"Well, enough of this," he said briskly; "ready, sergeant-major?" he added, looking at Bannister.

"All present and correct, sir," replied Benny in his best N.C.O. manner.

"Then carry on—*march!*"

It was a strange scene, and as the procession walked down the corridor *en route* for the below-stairs area, Standish could see out of the corner of his eye various members of the Lablonde household staff peeping curiously from behind partially-closed doors. He paid little attention to them; the sight of the revolver he held in either hand was sufficient, he deemed, to keep these people in their place.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PROFESSOR'S LAST CARD

It was a tight squeeze, getting them all into the cellar that had previously been the prison of Bannister and himself, more especially as a good deal of the floor space was already occupied by the bodies of the dead men; but, as he had said, he had no option in the matter. They had to be locked up, prior to being taken away under arrest, and they must make the best of a bad job.

"After all," he concluded, "it's fair enough; you shouldn't be here, Greisner, in the first place, so you can't have any reasonable grounds for complaint. . . . See that you lock 'em up safely, Benny," he adjured his assistant. "And bring me the key."

"Leave it to me, guv'nor," was the cheerful response.

Turning on his heel, Tiger returned to the Council Chamber. He now intended to make a thorough search of the house; as this was a meeting-place for enemy agents, it was more than probable that valuable documents of some description would be found there. That would take time, however, and in the meanwhile he had to get busy in another direction. There was a telephone call to be put through to Bellamy. He wanted the whole boiling securely bagged.

By the time he had completed a very cursory and superficial search of the room—and found nothing of any importance—Bannister had rejoined him.

TIGER STANDISH STEPS ON IT

"Well, guv'nor, what's next on the *menu*?" asked his servant.

"I must get through to Sir Harker Bellamy—I wonder where the 'phone is?"

"There's one just outside, guv'nor—an extension, no doubt, for His Nibs when 'e wants to ring up one of 'is perishin' mummies . . . ha, ha!" replied Benny.

Standish grinned at Bannister's comments.

"You seem to find this sort of thing amusing, Benny," he remarked.

"Well, I should say so, guv'nor; I might 'ave been a stiff 'un by now—whereas I'm still alive and kickin'. Who wouldn't laugh?"

"Well, there's something in that," retorted his master, who began to walk in the direction of the door that Bannister had indicated.

There was the telephone right enough, as Benny had said, but when he lifted the receiver he knew at once that something was wrong.

"The old Prof., as you call him, Benny," he said over his shoulder, "is not quite so crazy as we imagined; anyway, he has had enough sense to cut the telephone wire. I can't get through."

"It ain't no use diallin' 999 then, guv'nor!" was the reply.

"Not the slightest. What——"

The ejaculation was forced from him by a second disturbing discovery: without any warning at all, darkness had descended on them in an impenetrable pall.

From out of this gloom, Standish heard Bannister's shrewd comment.

"You're right, guv'nor; the old Prof. 'asn't got *all* 'is blinkin' tiles loose."

Paying no attention, Tiger dashed back to the Council Chamber. Here one of the big candles left on the table was still burning. Picking it up, he returned to the corridor where he had left Benny.

"Either you're right about the Professor, Benny, or there are some other rats that we haven't rounded up."

"It might 'ave been one of the servants," put in Bannister.

THE PROFESSOR'S LAST CARD

"Yes, it might . . . anyway, we shall have to do the best we can."

"Do you think it would be any good for me to pop out and 'phone from the nearest call-box—you remember there was one at the end of the road; the one we passed the first time we came here?"

Standish shook his head.

"No, that's no good, Benny; in the first place, I doubt whether you would be able to leave the house now; and, secondly, as we are working in the dark in a double sense, I don't want you to leave my side. As I said just now, we've got to go through this house and search for the other rats—but the first thing to do is to find that madman, Lablonde. He's roaming about somewhere, I haven't any doubt."

"Quite so, my dear Mr. Standish!"

The observation came from above; and, looking up, Tiger saw the meagre form of someone he imagined must be Professor Lablonde.

He called up to him.

"Just the very man I wanted to see," he observed, trying to keep his voice pleasant; "what about coming down to join us, Professor?"

A thin, hee-hawing sound that might have been meant for laughter was the reply.

"No, I am quite happy where I am, my dear Mr. Standish," the Professor said; "quite happy, because, you see, I hold the last and master-card in the very interesting game you're trying to play to-night. No doubt, you thought yourself clever, but it's the last move in life, as in chess, that counts. I am not the type of person to be caught napping; surrounded by enemies as I know myself to be—the agents of your infernal Government—I have devoted the past few months to preparing for any contingency: even such a complete upheaval in my normal life as has happened to-night. You could shoot me, of course—I see that you have a revolver in your hand—but that might be very awkward for you afterwards, don't you think? You see, there would have to be explanations; you couldn't put the deed down to one of the men you have left shut up

in the cellar, because they would be able to give contrary evidence; neither could you plead that you had acted in self-defence, because if you did that, no one would believe you—why should they, seeing the difference in our ages and strength? No,” went on the cackling but venomous voice, “I think I will stay where I am. But I warn you that I am about to take a drastic step to defend my house and my property from your illegal intrusion. I shall count three; and if at the end of that time——”

He did not complete the sentence because Tiger cut in. He had had about enough of this absurd gabble.

“I admit I intruded here to-night, Professor, but I submit, in the circumstances, that I had a perfect right to do so. And, in any case, I intend to stay here now—I have work to do.”

“You have work to do, eh?” sneered Lablonde in reply; “well, we shall see for how long you will be able to do that work.”

He stepped back after uttering the last word, and Tiger was conscious immediately afterwards of a strange, hissing sound that began to beat about his ears.

He did not, however, realise actually what had happened until he heard Bannister, the old soldier, crying suddenly:

“Good God, guv’nor, it’s *gas*!”

Then, when it seemed too late, he began to stagger on his feet. A fine spray of vapour was descending on them from above through three ornamental bosses. And, from the landing where Professor Lablonde had been standing, there came a shriek of maniacal laughter, as the two victims started to stagger towards the door.

A confused bedlam of noises followed. There was the sound of crashing glass, of men’s heavy breathing, of blistering oaths, and then Tiger remembered nothing more.

He was “out.”

CHAPTER XIX

BELLAMY, IN PERSON

"No, you're not dead yet!" a familiar voice said—and Tiger, coming out of that horrible spell of unconsciousness, found that it was Sir Harker Bellamy who was bending over him.

"B.!" he ejaculated.

"None other, my lad," was the reassuring answer, slightly edged with satire; "once again your guardian angel, B. in person, has pulled you out of the *potage*. Why the devil did you allow yourself to be gassed?"

Standish, feeling that he was at a temporary disadvantage, got slowly to his feet.

"That's a pretty cock-eyed one," he retorted; "and, since we're asking questions; how the hell did you get here, anyway?"

Bellamy gave a characteristic chuckle. The sound was refreshing to the hearer, because it told Standish that he was back in his old, familiar world.

"Carlimero brought me here," then said Bellamy.

"Don't be an ass! What do you mean—Carlimero brought you here?"

"Exactly what I said. After pushing that knife through to you—and by the way, I shall be glad to have it back now, if you have no further use for it; I find it handy for cleaning out my old pipes!—I ran across Carlimero in the grounds. He was very peeved; apparently, Greisner had tried to double-cross him, and as there isn't any love lost between them before, he had his shirt badly out. We made a bargain."

"Are you mad, B.?" angrily retorted Standish; "or are you trying to pull my leg?"

"Neither, my dear boy. I mean exactly what I say; for to-night's performance only, Carlimero and I became allies instead of enemies. And he lived up to his word, too—if it hadn't been for him, I shouldn't have been here

TIGER STANDISH STEPS ON IT

to rescue you from that beastly gas—by the way, it doesn't appear to have had much effect on you, thank God."

"Only to make my head whirl," was the reply. "But that of course may be entirely due to your own gas. Where's Carlimero now?"

"Gone," was the answer, "but he left a parting message for you."

"Very kind of him."

"Perhaps. . . . Anyway, he told me to tell you that he is still quite determined to put your light out, and that to-night must be considered only as a temporary truce."

An impatient gesture acknowledged the words.

"All this is giving me a headache," replied Standish. "I want some fresh air."

He then looked round.

"Where's Benny?" he asked.

"I rather fancy he's interviewing the Professor," returned Bellamy dryly; "ah! here he is."

Standish's spirits were revived by the sight of Bannister coming into the room, dragging Lablonde after him like a farmer taking a bedraggled and terrified fowl to the chopping-block.

"Here's old rot-guts, guv'nor!" he heard his servant say, pushing Lablonde forward; what do you mean by it, you mouldy bit of mummy, eh?"

"I was justified in defending my property." Incredible sight as he was himself, the Professor's voice held a certain dignity.

Bellamy put up his hand.

"That will do, Benny," he said. "I'll look after the Professor from now on."

Bannister grimaced towards Standish.

"You'd better look after some other people, too—there's a fine bunch of enemy spies down below in the cellar," returned Tiger. "I tried to get through to you on the 'phone, but somebody had cut the line."

Bellamy looked at his watch.

"My men should be here by now," he remarked. "You see," he explained, "although I wanted to convince myself

that there was some life left in the old dog—myself being the old dog—I made the proviso that if I didn't ring through to my men by eleven-thirty they should get on to the Yard and get them to send a squad out here. It rather sounds as though they've just arrived," as a loud knocking was heard from up above.

"You think of everything, B., don't you?" commented Standish.

"I try to," was the irritatingly complacent reply; "well, Bannister?" looking across at Benny.

The latter fidgeted.

"Ave I to be a lackey for cops?" he returned.

"Let 'em in, Benny," said Standish; "that is, if some of the servants haven't beaten you to it."

"Oh, very well," and the disgruntled Bannister went off.

A few minutes later, a man who, by no conceivable chance, could have been mistaken for anything but a high-rank police officer in plain clothes, came into the room. His face was determined; his voice harsh.

"Sir Harker Bellamy?" he enquired.

"I'm Bellamy," replied the Chief of Q.1.

"Detective-Inspector Hoskins of New Scotland Yard, Sir Harker; we've had a message from your Department; and——"

"That's all right, Inspector; very pleased to see you," broke in the other; "I'm not at liberty to tell you what has been going on here to-night—it's a M.1. 5 matter, you understand—but there are a number of men to be taken into custody."

"Where are they?" came the sharp retort. Detective-Inspector Hoskins had the demeanour of a person disappointed; judging by the shape of his face, he was a pronouncedly acquisitive type.

"In a cellar down below," was the reply; "you'd better ring up for a police van."

"I'll see the prisoners first, if you don't mind," said the Detective-Inspector; "but what about this?" and he pointed to Professor Edmund Lablonde.

"Oh," returned Bellamy, "he's not in your line at all; you see, he's a lunatic."

Much as he wished to appear entirely unperturbed this fresh piece of information made Detective-Inspector Hoskins register astonishment.

"A lunatic?"

"Madman, if you prefer the term," was the smiling retort; "but he is as crazy as a coot at all events."

Detective-Inspector Hoskins had never been suspected of possessing a sense of humour, so it could not have been said that he was gibing at Bellamy when he replied: "You will look after him yourself, then, Sir Harker?"

Disregarding the threatening guffaw from Standish, Bellamy replied gravely:

"Quite so, Inspector; I will be the lunatic's keeper. And now, hadn't you better go below? Mr. Bannister here will show you the way."

A few minutes later, the speaker was facing an exceedingly irate police official.

"What do you mean, Sir Harker, by trying to make a monkey of the Yard?" he exploded.

Bellamy almost exploded in turn.

"Be more careful in your language, if you please, Inspector; in any case, I don't in the least know what you are talking about."

It looked as though Hoskins' eyes would pop out of his head.

"Didn't you tell me just now there were a number of prisoners down below?"

"I certainly did! Why do you ask?"

"Because, if they were there, they aren't there now!" was the bombshell of an answer.

After the Detective-Inspector had left with suitable apologies—which he received with a 'characteristic ill-grace—Bellamy turned to Bannister.

"Are you to blame?" he asked sternly.

Benny bridled instantly.

"No, I'm not!" he replied; "I locked those perishers in right enough—and 'ow they got out . . . well, it's a blinkin' miracle; that's wot it is; a blinkin' miracle."

"I'm quite sure it wasn't Benny's fault," supported Standish; "if you ask me, it was one of the servants; I ought to have rounded them up as well, I suppose; but, honestly, B., I just about had my hands full."

Bellamy nodded.

"Well, it's certainly unfortunate, but apparently it couldn't be helped. Now Greisner and his gang are free to start some fresh trouble."

Standish took him up on one point.

"You told me that Carlimero must be treated with care because he could claim diplomatic privilege; well, what about Greisner?"

"The Mole" smiled.

"The two cases represent a distinction with a difference," he rejoined; "you see, my dear Tiger, I know Carlimero to be the Military Attaché at the Ronstadtian Embassy, but, not having seen Greisner, I merely took him to be one of a gang of burglars."

"He's that all right."

"That, at least, is the story I should have told Lord Bradney, the Commissioner of Police—and after that it would have been *his* pigeon! . . . And now, I suppose, we had better be going home."

CHAPTER XX

THE MAN WITH THE NEW FACE

It was a couple of days later, the time being nine o'clock in the evening. The scene was the small flat at Streatham which Carlimero had taken under the name of "Charles Mott," and sitting opposite him now in the small sitting-room was a man at whose face he could not help staring.

The visitor smiled at his host's bewilderment.

"It's quite a transformation, isn't it?" he said, after allowing Carlimero's curiosity to remain unsatisfied for at least five minutes; "I don't wonder you doubted I was

Rahusen. But now I will explain: although my pallor, that leaden hue which made me known picturesquely but not very flatteringly as 'The Man with the Dead Face,' was useful to me in my successful attempt to return to England, I realised later that, with so many enemies walking about, and with the whole of London on the *qui vive*, it would prove a decided handicap. So, I have been under treatment for the past few days by a famous facial surgeon—a Caronian, by the way, who is now a naturalised British subject. When I tell you his name is Virginio Francisci, you will no doubt recall him?"

The other waved the hand which held the cigarette in a token of acquiescence.

"Yes, of course," he replied; "why, he's one of the most famous surgeons in Harley Street!"

Rahusen slyly grinned.

"And, incidentally, a close personal friend of Signor Brassiano. You know, of course, that the latter has always been one for the ladies—and, whenever Francisci goes to Caronia on holiday, they do some roystering together. That, amongst other things, is a bond between them.

"But enough of frivolity," Rahusen went on; "I have had the texture of my skin changed to a much more becoming hue—don't you envy me my robust, open-air complexion?—in order that I may take up my duties soon as the new manager of the Three Graces night-club. As you must be aware, my dear Carlimero, the Three Graces is the latest haunt of all that is supposed to be smartest and fashionable in London society; why, everyone of note goes there at some time or other; politicians, generals, actresses, as well as, shall I say, men of our own profession?"

"That barbarian Greisner goes there," said Carlimero. "I have often heard him boast about it in the Embassy."

Again Rahusen grinned.

"Which is one reason why the completely-disguised (I hope) Rahusen will shortly be taking up his new position as manager. Tell me, Carlimero, would you still fail to recognise me if you did not know?"

The Caronian shook his head.

"No, I'll be damned if I would know you!" he declared emphatically.

"It is a neat trick that Francisci has done; he has injected some chemical agent, the name of which he will not tell me, beneath the skin, and has thus revived the blood vessels—or so he says."

Carlimero was in no mood to listen to medical marvels; on the other hand, he was very anxious to learn how his companion had been successful in obtaining this extraordinary appointment of manager to a fashionable London night-club.

"That, too, is quite easily explained," Rahusen told him; "in fact, my dear Carlimero, I have observed all through my life that almost anything is possible providing a man is resolute enough and determined to have his way. But in this case, I am afraid I can take very little credit upon myself, except putting up the suggestion to Signor Brassiano. It was he who pulled the strings; Caronia, as, of course, you know, is a nation of *restaurateurs*, and this night-club so picturesquely called the Three Graces, has recently come into the market. The former manager, a Swiss, had fallen into the unfortunate habit of misappropriating most of the profits. Unbeknown to most people, the controlling interests of the Three Graces have just been acquired, under the rose, naturally, by people acting for Signor Brassiano—I was informed of this fact by telephone only this morning."

Carlimero, who knew Brassiano merely by reputation, felt distinctly aggrieved that Rahusen, who was not even a Caronian, should be so much in the confidence of the First Man in his country; but, as Rahusen and he were both about to serve under the same flag, he made no comment except to congratulate the other upon this astute move.

"Yes," confirmed Rahusen, "the post should be a very valuable one to me—so long as I am not identified, of course. If that were to happen, it would be nothing short of a tragedy. You will know me, Carlimero, under the name of M. Ludx. I shall be a native of Luxemburg—to be a native of Luxemburg appears to be the safest

possible thing at the present international juncture," he added with a third sly smile.

"But now enough of myself—what is your news since I saw you last?"

Very rapidly Carlimero informed him of the astonishing events that had occurred at the house in Wimbledon two nights before.

Waiting, without comment, until he had come to an end, Rahusen then said: "And does this affect your attitude towards Standish?"

Carlimero became vehement.

"Not in the slightest!" he returned hotly; "circumstances forced me to swear on my mother's honour that I would help Bellamy, but I informed him, and almost in the same breath, I had sworn by my father's blood that I would kill his murderer."

Rahusen, whose habitually cynical nature would have induced him to smile at such a statement had he not considered it impolitic to do so, contented himself with nodding.

"I hope you will keep to that resolve, my friend, but if you find through any fresh set of circumstances that you are unable to do so, I will carry the torch myself. Standish has caused me enough humiliation in the past . . . and his precious employer, Bellamy, too."

"I shall kill Standish myself—you need not worry about that; but, meanwhile, I am in a difficulty."

"About what, my friend?"

"I don't know whether to stay at the Ronstadtian Embassy or not; since Tuesday night, when I almost killed that swine, Greisner, I find the tension between us almost unbearable. Every time we meet the air vibrates."

Rahusen became serious.

"You must not do anything precipitous; in the name of Brassiano I forbid it," he said very sternly; "don't you see, Carlimero, you *must* stay on at the Embassy? You will be a most valuable ally to me in the task that I have been set. No," the speaker went on, with added emphasis, "at whatever cost, you must sacrifice yourself."

As I say, you must stay; you must even pretend to remain friends with this barbarian Greisner. There is no man whose help I shall require more urgently than yours—and perhaps in the very near future, too. . . . And now, as time is getting on, I am afraid I must get back to the little haven at Notting Hill Gate which is my present *pied-à-terre*. Good night, my friend."

The two strangely-contrasted personalities shook hands solemnly after exchanging the Caronian national salute.

It was all very amusing, Rahusen decided, as he got into his taxi: his new face, with its almost bizarre rosy complexion, was contorted into a smile as he drove away.

CHAPTER XXI

INTRODUCING M. LUDX

AT a corner table in the Three Graces night-club, Sir Harker Bellamy and Tiger Standish sat surveying the vivid scene. Fashions in entertainment change quickly nowadays in the world's great capitals, but the Three Graces ranked momentarily as London's most popular night resort. Rahusen had not exaggerated when he told Carlimero that all kinds of notabilities—including secret agents of every nationality—went there to be amused, to dance, to watch—and to listen.

The time was shortly after midnight, and the place was crammed. On the ridiculously restricted dance-floor, couples were jammed so tightly that they could only move inches at a time—any attempt to follow the rhythm of the band was out of the question.

Amidst such a gathering it was easy enough for Bellamy and Standish to pretend—at least, to the uninitiated—that their sole purpose in being at the Three Graces that night was to follow the general trend, and be amused. That was their pose, and they maintained it so successfully

that many comments were passed on "those two men in the corner who seemed to be having such a good time."

The real purpose of their visit, however, was something entirely different; beneath their smiles and seemingly idle chatter, the Chief of Q.1. and his companion were very serious indeed. They had come to this night haunt for a definite purpose—a purpose that was as far removed from frivolity as was possible to be imagined.

Bellamy had put the matter very succinctly to Tiger when the latter had called on him by appointment that afternoon.

"Free to-night?" he had asked, and when Standish had nodded, he had gone on: "Even if you hadn't been, I should have asked you to 'cut' whatever you might have been doing."

"Why?" Standish had demanded.

His superior took the short pipe out of his mouth and placed it on the desk. Recognising the sign, Standish knew the other meant business.

"Word has just come through from QX17, our principal agent in Menke, that the Ronstadtian people are shortly contemplating some tremendous *coup*. What this is he hasn't been able to find out, and he warns us, moreover, that, as he is afraid his 'cover' has been penetrated, he may be under direct suspicion by the Secret Political Police. If this is so, then poor Henderson——" Bellamy picked up a piece of paper from his desk, tore it in two and threw the pieces into the waste-paper basket. To Standish the action was vividly symbolic: Q.1. by now might have lost a very valuable agent.

"But whatever this *coup* may turn out to be," continued Bellamy, "it is being hatched in London—at least, Henderson thinks so. Which is why I have booked a corner table at the Three Graces for to-night."

"I may be owlishly stupid," Tiger had commented, "but why the Three Graces? It's the worst place in London, I hear, for catching a sore throat."

"I'll risk the sore throat," returned Bellamy crisply; "the Three Graces night-club, my boy, is the recognised

rendezvous for most of the higher-class international spies in London at the present time."

"I see," said Standish; "we're going slug-hunting again."

"Something of the sort."

"Do those Old Borstalians, Carlimerio and Greisner, appear in this stunt?"

"Very likely—but I can't tell you more than I know myself."

"Well, that's all right; I haven't heard a word from either for over a week now, and it's making me lose interest in my food."

Bellamy had not smiled at the joke.

"This is damned serious," he said; "so serious that I had to see both the P.M. and the F.S. this morning."

"The Prime Minister *and* the Foreign Secretary," commented Standish; "pshaw!"

"Yes, it's as bad as that!" continued the Chief of Q.I.; "I have to find out what this new, big and tremendously important move is—and the devil of it is I don't know exactly where to start."

"Oh, yes, you do," had replied Standish; "you told me that just now: we go to the Three Graces night-club to-night, and we start from there."

The grim expression of Bellamy's had relaxed.

"Tiger, sometimes you're almost sensible," was his retort.

The memory of this talk returned to Standish now, as, a cigar between his teeth, he looked quizzically at the spectacle that, like a film in techni-colour, unwound itself before his eyes. He recalled in particular the closing sentences of his Chief's.

"The Foreign Secretary asked me if there was one man in the whole of the British Intelligence who I felt was competent to get the low-down on the truth or untruth upon which might rest the future security of this country," Bellamy had wound up, speaking with a seriousness which was at once as impressive as it was unusual with him; "and I gave him your name. He said he would like to

see you himself, but I replied there was no need; I would put the situation to you and I was confident of what answer you would give. . . . Wait a moment, my boy," he had gone on, as the younger man had seemed about to make a comment; "if you bring this thing off—and I'm not attempting to deny that it will be a terribly difficult proposition—then I will give your wife a solemn promise that I will never call on you again. Now, what do you say?"

Before Standish could reply, he had his attention diverted in an unexpected manner.

A man, whose noticeably rosy face looked oddly at contrast with the mephitic atmosphere, sidled up to them.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he purred; "I hope you are enjoying yourselves?"

Bellamy was the one to answer.

"Very much," he replied; "oh, my boy," turning to Tiger, "you ought to know this gentleman; he's Monsieur Ludx, once of Luxemburg, but now manager of the Three Graces." As he spoke, his foot touched his companion's beneath the table.

Tiger played up.

"Delighted!" he drawled; "from Luxemburg, eh? That must be an interesting place, M. Ludx; I wonder you ever left it."

The rosy face split itself into a smile.

"It is unfortunately necessary for me to earn my living, monsieur, and opportunities in my native country are not very numerous. That is why I am in London. Perhaps, if the fates are kind, I shall return one day to my farm."

"Farm! Good God! you look as much like a farmer as my uncle here," indicating Bellamy, "looks like a gas-inspector."

M. Ludx smiled for the second time.

"I should have said to the farm I hope to return to," he replied; "all my forbears were farmers."

With that, and yet another smile, he bowed himself away.

"What's the matter, Tiger?" asked Bellamy in a low tone; "why are you fidgeting?"

"Because," was the answer, "I feel exactly like a dog that's run across a strange and horrible smell. Who is that fellow?" he went on sharply.

"I've already told you; he is the manager of this night-club—the new manager, to be exact; his predecessor did a flit with all the money he could lay his hands on—and he comes from Luxemburg."

"I'll bet you he's a wrong 'un, B.," returned Standish; "I feel it in my bones."

"I dare say he is," agreed Bellamy; "but that's for you to find out; it was one of the reasons I brought you along here to-night."

"The rummy thing about that cove is that I feel certain I know who he is, although I've never met him before. How do you account for that?"

"Ask me something easier," was the reply.

Standish continued to be abstracted. At the end of at least five minutes' soliloquy with himself, he said: "B., if I told you what was in my mind, you'd send me to join that poor old coot, Lablonde, in the mental home!"

"Tell me, all the same."

"Not yet; I want to verify it first," was Standish's reply.

With that, he appeared to cast off the incubus of dull care and yielded himself to the joy of the hour. He was interested to hear Bellamy's comments on many of the notabilities present; and his eyes shone when he saw Herr Greisner come in accompanied by a most spectacular blonde.

But he was most interested of all when, just before announcing he had had enough for one spasm, M. Ludx came sidling up to his table again.

"You are going, monsieur?" enquired the rosy-cheeked one.

"Yes, M. Ludx—it's long past my usual bedtime." He grinned as he looked straight into the other's eyes.

"I hope you will come again, monsieur," M. Ludx sent back.

"Bet your life I will—I'm quite interested in this show," was the emphatic reply.

"I am honoured, monsieur," said M. Ludx.

On the way out, Bellamy and Standish were forced to pass the table at which Greisner sat with his orchideous companion. Tiger grinned; the Ronstadtian scowled.

"How are you?" enquired Standish, and waved a hand.

"Who was that man?" asked the blonde, a minute later.

"Someone I hope shortly to kill," was the reply.

"How sad!" commented the latest recruit to the Ronstadtian Secret Service in London; "I thought him quite interesting. Do you wish me to get to know him?"

"No!" was the ungracious retort; "I will attend to that myself."

Smoking a final pipe, Tiger suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Benny!" he called, and Bannister burst in from the servants' quarters.

"Lor' lumme, guv'nor!" he protested, "'ave a 'eart! You nearly made me upset my Guinness! Wot's the matter?"

"Benny, have you ever known a man to have two separate and distinct faces?"

Bannister looked at him in fresh perplexity.

"You're not seein' snakes or red-'ot elephants or anythin' like that, as well, I s'pose, guv'nor?"

"No, Benny, but to-night I saw—come here; I'll whisper it."

After Bannister had straightened himself up, the pipe he had been holding fell out of his hand.

CHAPTER XXII

A SIREN-CALL FROM SOMERSET

SONIA looked up from her newspaper.

"I don't like the look of the news one little bit, old man," she stated as her husband bent to kiss her.

Tiger lifted a protesting hand.

"How many more times have I to tell you, my sweet, not to launch these thunderbolts at breakfast? They give me a belly-ache."

"But, seriously, Tiger," Sonia went on, "it looks very much as though war may break out at any moment."

"What war?"

"Don't be a fool! War with Ronstadt, of course—with Caronia sitting on the fence waiting to see which way the cat is going to jump."

Tiger helped himself to grilled sausages.

"Oh, that," he replied with a nonchalance that exasperated her; "well, what's the latest stop-press sensation?"

"Kuhnreich announces that he intends to call the Assembly."

"That former plumber's mate is always announcing something—I wish to God he'd lasso his larynx," returned Standish. "Any letters?"

"There's one for me from Aunt Caroline," replied Sonia. "You needn't start laughing, Tiger!"

"Is Aunt Caroline a fit subject for laughter?" he retorted.

"You ass, you know what I mean! She's a fidgety old stupid, of course, but she's been awfully sweet to me——"

"If needs be, I'm willing to lay down my life for Aunt Caroline," declared Tiger. "What does she say? Does she want you to do some shopping? I seem to remember that her pet vice is sending old-fashioned flannel undergarments out to the undeserving savages."

Sonia restrained her laughter.

"No, she doesn't want me to do any shopping; she wants me to go down and see her. Here, read it for yourself." And she tossed the sheet of paper over. Tiger, ceasing his stoking operations temporarily, picked up the letter and read the closely-written, angular script covering nearly two pages.

*The Maples,
Wellesden, Som.*

Tuesday.

My Dear Sonia,

Isn't this a dreadful time in which to live? I feel every morning as though it is too great an effort even to pick up the newspapers—let alone to read the horrible news. I don't know what you and your husband think, but I am sure in my own mind that this dreadful man, Kuhnreich, is determined to have his war. I was talking the other day to a Mr. Semple, who was in Ronstadt about eighteen months ago, and he said that even then people were talking about having another war with Britain.

I feel so anxious about you, dear, living in London—with the possibility of air raids and everything—and so I am writing to know if you would care to come down and stay with me here while I get my black-out curtains up; I feel sure I shall want them.

It is too much to ask, I suppose, for Mr. Standish to come with you?—there would be nothing for him to do here—except play chess with the vicar, and I don't imagine that he would find much enjoyment in that; but if he could possibly spare you, I should like you to come down as quickly as possible. I am all alone in the house now, as you know, and when I think of the dark days to come, I begin to feel for the first time in my life, really nervous.

A page of purely local gossip concerning the remote Somerset village in which the writer lived, followed, and then Aunt Caroline brought her epistle to a close.

"Poor old dear, she seems to have the wind up—I think you'd better go, darling," commented Tiger as he passed the letter back.

Sonia shot a swift glance at him.

"You don't want to get rid of me, by any chance, I hope?" she enquired.

"Dammit!" declared her husband; "I'm thinking solely of Aunt Caroline—with a spot of sympathy for you, too, my sweet; a few days in Wellesden ought to do you the world of good."

There was a little further discussion, at the end of which Sonia declared her intention of answering this siren-call from Somerset; and, a girl of quick decisions, she ordered her maid to pack forthwith, sent a telegram to announce her arrival that same day, and was thus able to catch the twelve o'clock express from Paddington.

"You'll take care of yourself, darling?" she said as Tiger kissed her good-bye.

"Bet your life!" he assured her; "I don't want to hand in my checks just yet."

But, after the long train had gone, Tiger turned to Benny Bannister who had driven them to the station.

"The missus seems to think there's going to be a war, Benny; what's your view?"

Bannister twisted his features into the contortions that generally betokened cerebral effort on his part.

"I don't *think*, guv'nor; I'm blinkin' well *sure* there's goin' to be a war. It's been sort of 'overin' about for some time; and now this fellow Kuhnreich is goin' right off the 'andle—you see if I'm not right."

"Well, I'm not saying you're right and I'm not saying you're wrong, Benny—you can't tell with maniacs like Kuhnreich; he is just as likely to burst into tears, blow his alleged brains out, or start a war that may last for years—that's what civilisation has brought us to, Benny!" And he pulled out his tobacco-pouch and filled his pipe.

Half an hour later he was talking to Sir Harker Bellamy.

"Is there going to be a war, B.?" he asked, coming straight to the point.

Bellamy frowned.

"I'm afraid so," he answered; "of course, with a neurotic

like Kuhnreich you can never tell what's going to happen, but all the information that's come into this room during the past twenty-four hours is definitely on the bad side—Battersby, for instance, sent a long message last night to the effect that Kuhnreich had called all his generals together, and had harangued them for hours on end at the Chancellory—and now we know that he is going to speak to the Assembly. He never does that unless he means business.”

“What about the internal situation there?”

“Very bad—and that, again, may be the deciding factor. All this, Tiger, my boy,” went on Bellamy, “is merely confirmation of what Henderson sent us a short time ago to the effect that Kuhnreich is concentrating a tremendous *coup* over here. You haven't forgotten, I suppose, that you have been placed in charge of the investigation?”

Tiger nodded.

“No, you old buzzard, I haven't forgotten—and now my hands are more or less clear.”

“Er?”

“Yes. It happened that my wife received a hurry-call from an aunt in Somerset this morning. Dear old soul, she is expecting the heavens to rain bombs on her village at any moment, and so she's already seeing about the black-out curtains she used in the last war, and wants Sonia to hang them up for her. So the poor kid has gone off by the twelve o'clock express.”

“Leaving you a free hand?”

“Yes. Something tells me, B., that I shall be looking in at the Three Graces to-night.”

Bellamy stuffed tobacco into his short, black pipe.

“Not a bad idea, my boy,” he replied enigmatically.

Back in the house in Chapel Street, Tiger called Benny to a short conference.

“I shan't be able to take you to-night, Benny,” he stated, “because it's one of those places where the full fish-and-coup kit is required.

Bannister looked peeved.

“I see—a swell joint, eh?”

Standish shook his head reprovably.

"I wish you wouldn't talk gangster-ese, Benny," he returned; "it's highly unbecoming in a man of your position."

Bannister looked at the speaker speculatively.

"Are you expectin' to see—well, you know who, there?" he asked.

"I shouldn't be surprised."

"You'll watch your step, guv'nor?" went on his servant, anxiously.

Standish smiled.

"I'll be walking on tin-tacks all the time, Benny," he retorted; smiling angelically.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LADY WITH A SOFT HEART

LONDON, constantly warned during the past few months by its newspapers that the blow might fall at any moment, was already prepared for the worst, and something of its preparations were visible as Tiger Standish entered the Three Graces night-club at eleven o'clock that evening. Both men and women visitors were already in a wide diversity of uniforms—the men in service kit, and the women bravely, almost ostentatiously, displaying themselves in all sorts of odd gear. So many of the habitués, indeed, had obviously girded and apparelled themselves for what seemed the inevitable forthcoming fray, that he felt painfully conspicuous in his orthodox evening clothes. And, by the glances which he received, he saw that he had already been cast for the ignominious *rôle* of The Man Who Had Left Himself Outside.

His questing eye might have appeared lazy, but it took in a good deal. He was able to see, for instance, that many well-known figures in so-called society were present, and all following the latest fashion by being curiously garbed. Holding the stage in one corner, for example,

was Lady Nadine Westerham, hitherto notorious for her promiscuity, and now endeavouring to catch the latest limelight by appearing in this fashionable night-club wearing navy-blue dungarees and an orange sweater. Getting a little closer, Standish was able to hear her say: "My *dear*, it's most ghastly fun! I'm organising an emergency fire-escape service—you know, for people living on the top floors of flats. I've let my Park Street place to some German Jews—most incredible people; they carry diamonds worth *millions* round with them and pull these out of their pockets when they have to pay for anything—God only knows where they put them when they were turned out of Ronstadt by Kuhnreich!"

The nerve-racking voice shrilled on. Tiger, who had known the woman from a child, and had always kept her at a safe and respectful distance—which was the only way to treat a creature of her type—turned away.

Seats appeared to be at a premium, and he was casting about for a temporary anchorage when he heard his name called. Over his right shoulder he saw M. Ludx.

The rosy face of the manager of the Three Graces was split into a welcoming smile.

"This is indeed a pleasure, Mr. Standish," the man said; "I hope I can be of some service to you?"

"I was just wondering whether I should clear off," was the reply; "you seem absolutely full."

"We are doing good business, I am glad to say," was the complacent reply; "that is very nice from my point of view, of course, seeing that I am the new manager—but I am certain that I can find a seat for you somewhere." He looked round the crowded room and then uttered an ejaculation apparently indicative of pleasure.

"Yes, over there," he went on; "allow me, my dear Mr. Standish," and he put a hand on Tiger's arm apparently for pilotage purposes.

Standish could have burst out laughing. He had sensed from the moment of M. Ludx's greeting (1) that a seat would be instantly found for him somewhere and (2) that preparations had already been made for his possible arrival.

M. Ludx had not spared expense. The lady seated at the table for two was very lovely; Tiger admitted the fact immediately. But what interested him more than her beauty was the knowledge that she had worked for Caronia as a spy for at least five years and had had many successes in the *rôle*. Indeed, she had more than earned her keep.

The manager bowed to her.

"The club is very full to-night," he said; "perhaps mademoiselle would not mind this gentleman sharing her table?"

She smiled.

"Of course not! My friend has been kept somewhere," now looking at Standish with a tantalising light in her eyes, "but even if he should turn up——" She gesticulated with her charming hands.

The words (and accompanying gesture) were intended obviously for a compliment, and Standish accepted both as such.

"That's very good of you," he said, giving his famous impersonation of a stolid Englishman; "but in the unhappy event of your friend turning up, I should of course clear off."

She smiled at him again, and, under cover of this, M. Ludx bowed and made his exit.

"You look so tall and big standing there; please sit down," she said, motioning to the vacant chair. And when Standish had complied: "Meanwhile, suppose we talk? My name is Laidley—Miriam Laidley."

"Mine's Pakenham," replied Standish; "Andrew Pakenham." He knew this woman's real name to be Valeria Ceccato, and he hoped that she was not equally aware that he was lying.

She certainly gave no indication of the fact, being entirely occupied, it seemed, upon providing agreeable companionship to a lonely man who happened to interest her. And certainly, if Standish had been only intent himself upon a couple of hours' dalliance, he could not have found a more agreeable partner. She approved of his choice of champagne—which was provided at an extortionate price—

and then, accepting a light for her cigarette, continued to talk.

"Does this sort of thing," she said, motioning with her hand, "appeal to you in the ordinary way?"

"Oh," he replied non-committally, "it fills in an empty hour."

She shook the ash off her cigarette.

"Men like you aren't going to have many empty hours in the future, are you?" she went on, her voice now more serious.

He pretended to be dense.

"Why not?" he returned.

"Well, if this ghastly war really does break out, you will be in the army, won't you?"

He gave her a blank stare.

"Well, naturally—instead of shooting pheasants, I shall be shooting Kuhnreich's thugs; better sport."

"I shall nurse somewhere or other," she supplied.

He professed a little surprise.

"Had any experience?"

"I've done some V.A.D. work already," she said.

He grinned.

"Let's hope when I get my packet I shall be sent to your hospital, then."

She leaned slightly towards him.

"You'd like that?"

"I should be a fool if I didn't."

"It's very sweet of you to say so, anyway—but I hope you don't get wounded."

He shrugged.

"If your name's on a bullet . . . well, that's all there is to it."

Valeria Ceccato, *alias* Miriam Laidley, suddenly shivered.

"Cold?" he asked with all the traditional obtuseness of the British male.

"It's the thought of all the misery, the pain, the suffering this war will cause," she replied; "I know it's not fashionable nowadays to be soft-hearted, but I happen to be made that way."

It was admirably done, and it would have been ungallant on his part not to recognise it.

"Don't worry too much; it may not happen."

"What makes you say that?" she retorted.

He would not be drawn. Tiger was fairly certain by this time that this soft-hearted companion knew he was Standish—no doubt, some sign had been given to her by Ludx during the few moments the manager of the Three Graces had stood by the table—and the knowledge was giving an added relish to the game.

"No reason at all—except it's what I hear a lot of other people are saying."

"That's merely wishful thinking on their part," was the answer. She shivered again. "I feel I can't stay here," she added; "it's like dancing in a cemetery."

He made the offer which any other man would have done in the same circumstances.

"Shall I see you home?" he enquired.

"Would it bore you too much?"

"On the contrary." He tried to ape the vapidness of the obsequious courtier.

"Very well," she said; "I shall be very glad. Forgive me for being so dull."

He made no reply to this. Instead, he shook his head to intimate he could not possibly agree with the statement.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE POISON-CUP

THE flat was as charming as its occupier—decorative enough, but not too bizarre after the modern manner. Tiger, as he stood looking at his hostess, wondered what the next move would be.

He knew that he had taken a risk in accepting Valeria Ceccato's invitation to "come in for a minute." True,

no possible exception could have been taken to the way in which this request had been made: it was merely the customary acknowledgment of the modern woman of the world for a courtesy received. But Tiger, an old hand at this game, realised that if he entered this woman agent's flat, something besides the making of polite conversation would be bound to follow. The soft-hearted Valeria would not use up her time, he was confident, sitting twiddling her thumbs. She must know by this time who he was, and had lured him to her flat for a very specific purpose. Well, he'd see the thing through. . . . The only difficulty was that she might be suspicious of the alacrity with which he had fallen for her plan; but he would have to risk that.

The plot continued to run along familiar lines.

"You'll stay to smoke a cigarette?" she asked, taking off her hat and coat and throwing them on to a settee.

"If I may."

She patted the place by her side.

"You're not afraid of me, you big man?" she gently scoffed.

"Good Lord, no!" he replied; "why should I be?"

"Then why not sit down and be comfortable?" she asked.

He lowered his great length.

"That's better; you looked so awkward standing up—and you made me feel awkward too. But now things are different," patting his hand. "Tell me about yourself; all I know so far is that your name is Pakenham. What do you do?"

"Oh, just fool around," he said.

"Haven't you any profession?"

"None worth speaking about."

"Lucky you! But London seems full nowadays of men who have plenty of money——"

"I haven't said I've plenty of money."

She laughed.

"But you implied it—and you must have plenty of money if you can exist without doing any work. . . . But what am I thinking about?" she continued, breaking off quickly;

"you must think I am a terribly poor hostess. What will you drink? Whisky-and-soda?"

"I should like a whisky very much indeed," he replied.

"Of course, you poor dear! Excuse me for a moment. My maid is out," she explained, "so I shall have to get it myself."

"Don't bother."

"It's no bother—if you don't mind waiting."

"Well, if you insist."

"I do—I must try to repay you in *some* way for all your kindness."

When he was alone, Tiger summed up the facts—and came to an inevitable conclusion. That drink, when it came, would be drugged. He hadn't the slightest doubt about it. The knowledge forced him to revise his former opinion: it now seemed likely that the worthy M. Ludx (friend Rahusen before he did that monkey-business with his face), had not given the woman his full confidence: he could not have told her the name of her prospective victim, evidently contenting himself by saying that he was merely someone he wanted temporarily put away. Why? Murder? Kidnapping? The latter first, perhaps, with the other following. After the last scrap they had had, it was only natural that Rahusen should want to get his own back. But was he working with Greisner or against him? Rahusen for years had been prominently connected with the Ronstadtian Secret Service. Had he now switched to another employer, Signor Brassiano of Caronia, or was this merely a private feud? Perhaps he was only giving a helping hand to Carlimero. The answer to the riddle would be forthcoming in due time, without a doubt—but, meanwhile, there was the drink.

"Felt lonely?" The warm-hearted Miriam was back again. She carried a small tray on which were two glasses.

Standish looked up.

"No," he smiled. "As a matter of fact, I've been very busy."

"'Busy'?" A frown hovered above her eyes.

He repeated his fatuous smile.

"Yes, I've been thinking what a lucky devil I was to meet you to-night."

"Oh, *that!*" The frown disappeared to be replaced by a little burst of gay laughter.

"You're an awfully nice man, aren't you?" she said by way of reward. "Here's your drink." She passed him a glass.

"Thanks." He raised it. "Cheers."

"Cheers," she responded.

Tiger, above the rim of his glass, was able to see how hard her eyes had become: he wasn't the first poor devil who had raised a poisoned cup prepared by her fair hands: that he would have been ready to swear, even if he had not known her reputation. The only difference was, of course, that he wasn't really Mr. Muggins.

A few moments later, he had placed the glass back on the tray—empty. It had been a neat trick which he had played off on her, a trick consisting of some swift sleight-of-hand that he had first seen done in a café at Algiers. It required nerve, assurance, a masterly bluff—and constant practice.

"Excellent!" he said, quietly smacking his lips and beaming across at her; "you seem to know men's tastes in whisky, my dear," he went on.

She shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"Oh, I don't know," she parried; "as a matter of fact, that whisky is my own brother's choice, and I always keep it in the flat in case he should drop in."

Standish nodded. It was a peculiar kind of nod—just the sort of thing that a man attacked by loss of nerve control would have given. The drugged drink which he was supposed to have swallowed, but that in actual fact was moistening the carpet at the back of the divan, was no doubt intended to act swiftly. He had to do the same.

"Awfully . . . sorry . . . but . . . *tired!*" he stammered, putting a hand up to his mouth to hide a capacious yawn.

She was instantly all sympathetic attention.

"You poor darling. I expect you've had a very hard day—and then the stuffy atmosphere at that horrible night-club . . . here's a cushion; don't mind me; lie down and go to sleep, if you like—you'll be all right—I'll look after you."

Now if Tiger had actually absorbed that drug into his system, he knew he would have heard the words coming to him as though the woman, instead of being so near, was standing a great distance away; instead, they sounded so clear that every faculty he possessed was at the razor-edge of efficiency. He knew, moreover, that all his prognostications had been proved correct. It was a cheering reflection.

And now, what?

The first thing, naturally, was to fall in with the woman's wishes; for in no other way would he be able to ascertain exactly what her future plans were. So, with a neat little bit of further bluffing, he ejaculated a few muffled words of thanks—and lay back on the divan as though completely knocked out by fatigue.

A few moments passed. And then he felt the woman's breath on his face; she was bending over him, trying to discover, of course, if he were playacting. But, although the temptation to laugh was so great, he controlled himself and continued to give a masterly impression of the poor mutt he had set out to portray.

"And so the great Tiger Standish is not so great after all!" The warm-hearted Valeria was communing with herself. A scornful laugh followed. "Yes, here he is——"

What else the Caronian woman spy was about to say was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone on the top of the built-in bookcase on the other side of the room.

"Damn!" she ejaculated; and then, as though determined to vent her annoyance out on her victim, she smacked the supposedly unconscious man sharply across the cheek.

Now it was Standish who did some communing: but he did it mentally, and even without moving his lips.

"Thanks very much!" he reflected; "I'll try to make you pay for that before the night is out."

Then he concentrated on listening to what the woman was saying.

"Yes, it's I . . . yes . . ."—a short laugh followed—"he's here"—another short laugh—"oh, yes . . . it was easy."

Not too satisfactory, because there were some blanks to be filled in. But he felt he could supply the missing words. The woman had been speaking, without any doubt, to the worthy M. Ludx. She had told him that the plot had worked. The worthy M. Ludx might or might not have expressed his surprise—he would learn that later. The soft-hearted Valeria had been somewhat cocksure, judging by her tone. Well, perhaps, according to her own reasoning, she felt she had reason. . . .

It had been a trying time, the twenty minutes or so that had elapsed between Valeria Ceccato replacing the receiver and the arrival of M. Ludx, *alias* Rahusen. Trying, because the Caronian woman spy had occupied the time by sitting near him and pouring out a flood of malicious abuse about the British in general and his unworthy self in particular.

Even now, she might have been endeavouring to find out if he were shamming; but on the other hand, it might well be that her virulent hatred of the country in which she was now living was so overpowering that she welcomed this opportunity to give it voice. In either case, it was very trying.

But, with the entry of his old enemy, Standish felt that things were due not only to brighten, but develop. Nor was he mistaken.

The face-transformed manager of the Three Graces night-club came over to the divan, after exchanging a brief greeting with the woman, and, stooping, lifted the eyelids of the supposedly unconscious man. This again required a good deal of self-control on Standish's part, but that he pulled it off successfully was proved by Ludx saying: "Yes, he's 'out' right enough—but what I can't

understand is why he fell for it? Didn't he have any suspicion?"

The woman, her pride outraged, replied vehemently.

"Of course he didn't—what do you take me for—a bungler?"

The other cut her short sharply.

"Don't be a fool!" he exclaimed; "I'm merely trying to get at the bottom of this—Standish may have posed as a fool to you, but I know he's not a fool. . . . He drank all the stuff, you say?"

"Down to the last drop," she returned; "look at the glass for yourself."

The visitor, after examining the empty glass, appeared more satisfied.

"Well, the main thing is that he *did* drink it—although I'm still——"

This time it was he who was cut off sharply.

"Oh, for God's sake, don't stand there babbling!" Valeria Ceccato cried passionately; "get on with what you were going to do."

Standish, expecting a violent quarrel to ensue, was surprised by hearing the woman's companion reply mildly.

"Don't get excited, my dear," the manager of the Three Graces night-club rejoined; "this is far too important a matter for either of us to lose our heads. Now," he continued, "unless I'm very much mistaken in my chemist, the drug I gave you to put into Standish's drink will exert such a hypnotic hold over his unconscious self, that he will reply to any questions I put to him. What we have to find out—and these are Signor Brassiano's strict instructions—are the names of the British agents at present operating in Caronia—especially in those areas which may become disaffected in case of war. Prop him up."

Tiger, who dared not open his eyes, felt the woman's arms slide round his neck. Exerting pressure, she brought him up into a sitting posture.

"That will do," he then heard Ludx say; "and now for these questions."

"Shall I take a note of what he says?" enquired the woman.

"Yes, but write it in the new code—you know that, of course?"

"Of course—you seem to forget my position in the Service!" she went on indignantly.

"Never mind your pride, Number Eleven," broke in the man swiftly; "now are you ready?"

"Yes."

The interrogator cleared his throat.

"Listen to me," he said, in a firm, commanding tone, addressing the "subject"; "your name is Standish?"

Tiger felt he had to risk it; in any case, he must carry on with the masquerade for so long as he was able. He wanted information himself—wasn't that the principal reason why he had gone to the Three Graces that night? True, the villainous threat to Great Britain according to Bellamy was to come from Ronstadt, but it was quite likely that her Axis partner would be in the secret—and if so, the transformed Rahusen would probably know a great deal about it.

In any case he had to pretend. That was why to this first question, he gave the answer: "Yes."

"You are a member of the British Intelligence?"

"Yes."

"You work under the direct orders of Sir Harker Bellamy, who controls the Department known as Q.1.?"

"Yes."

"You are in Bellamy's confidence?"

"To a certain extent."

"You are directly engaged in counter-espionage work at the present time?"

"Yes."

"Now, Mr. Standish, I want you to pay attention to me very carefully. You understand?"

"Yes."

"It is my business to ask you these questions; it is your business to answer them truthfully. You understand that?"

"Yes."

"Now, what do you know about British Secret agents at present operating in Caronia?"

"Very little."

"What?"

"I know very little."

"Are you trying to deceive me?"

"No."

"Then why do you say that?"

"Because my work deals with checking Ronstadtian agents in this country."

"You know nothing about what is being done in Caronia?"

"I know next to nothing."

Even if the circumstances had been changed, Tiger would have given the same truthful answers. But the responses irritated the questioner; though he still did not open his eyes, Tiger could get a very good mental visual picture of him; old Rahusen must be shaken by fury.

"You're lying to me!" the other now exclaimed.

"No—I'm telling you the truth."

And then, before the interrogator could say anything further, the door opened with such unexpectedness that a woman's stifled scream spilled into the air.

CHAPTER XXV

THE JOKER TAKES THE TRICK

A HARSH and unmistakable voice followed the entry into the room of another person.

"I shouldn't advise any of you to move," said this voice, which Tiger was able to recognise as belonging to Karl Greisner, Chief of the Ronstadtian spy system in England.

Greisner! This certainly looked like complicating the present business, but he must wait and see what happened. In any case, he couldn't very well do anything—or, at least, not very much—at the moment.

Ludx swung round on the intruder.

"Herr Greisner!" he exclaimed in a voice that denoted mingled surprise and anger.

Valeria Ceccato took up the cry.

"Who is this man?" she said, appealing to Ludx. "And by what right does he come into my flat without warning?"

Greisner turned on her in furious anger.

"Stop that playing the innocent, you stupid fool!" he barked; "you think I don't know you as Valeria Ceccato, the Caronian women agent? And do you also think," turning now on Ludx, "that, in spite of your transformed face, I don't know Rahusen—the man who let us down so badly when we employed him last?"

Ludx stood his ground.

"I would remind you, Herr Greisner, that my name is Ludx, and that I am the manager of the Three Graces night-club. This lady's name is Laidley—Miriam Laidley."

The other burst into a raucous laugh.

"And it is in those capacities, I suppose, that you are now entertaining this gentleman?" walking up to Standish. "It was because I learned of his arrival here that I came myself," he added.

Whilst signalling to the woman to remain silent, Ludx now changed his tune.

"I am a Caronian agent," he said; "I know nothing about the man you have called Rahusen—but, I admit now, I am a Caronian agent. And it was as a Caronian agent that I had this fellow," pointing to Standish, "brought here to-night. I was in the act of questioning him when you arrived, Herr Greisner."

The other laughed again—this time more raucously than before.

"And what did you want to know from this English swine?"

"The names of the British agents now operating in Caronia—and I did so under Signor Brassiano's direct orders."

Greisner looked at Standish under lowered lids.

"You drugged him?"

"Yes . . ."

Then came a dramatic interruption.

"*He didn't drink it!*" screamed Valeria Ceccato; "he pretended to but—*look!*" Her finger was pointing down to the carpet at the back of the divan.

Now was the time to call upon all his reserves. Tiger Standish sat up calmly and smiled.

"No, my dear Valeria," he remarked, "I didn't drink it—you see, I've rather an objection to filling my guts with unknown poisons. . . . Hullo, Greisner, so you've turned up! Well, now we're quite a party!"

Knowing full well that he was risking his life, Standish stared the other out.

Greisner spat on the floor.

"Tut! Tut! Manners, my dear fellow!" mildly rebuked Standish.

"So! You have been clever again, *hein?*" Greisner choked; "but it is one thing to hoodwink these fools," pointing to the furious pair of Caronian spies, "and quite another to deceive *me!*" He beat his breast. "That I have proved to you before."

Tiger yawned.

"My dear chap," he replied, his hand still to his mouth, "you must forgive me if I don't pay you all the attention I feel you deserve; you see, what with hanging about that beastly night-club, the Three Graces—oh, Rahusen," turning, "you really ought to see to the ventilation: there's enough bad air in that place to gas a regiment—drinking out of poisoned cups, being made love to by this soft-hearted lady here——"

"You lie!" broke in Valeria Ceccato passionately; "I made love to you? I would rather die!"

"Well, if it wasn't love, it was the thing nearest to it—hate," he told her. "And, coming on the top of all this," turning his attention to Greisner once again, "you come butting in with your melodramatics. I've had a hard day and I want my bed."

Greisner looked as though he would burst every blood vessel he possessed.

"You think you are going to leave here?" he retorted.

Tiger yawned again.

"Certainly, my dear fellow! Why not? You see, the

flat, from the very moment I entered it with this fair charmer to-night, has been under the closest observation by the blokes in my Department. . . . Oh, you weren't able to notice anything, I'm certain, but you can bet your sweet life, Greisner, that they know you're here—and they'll be looking in to see you directly I blow this whistle." Extending the article he had taken from his pocket in the direction of the other, he grinned beatifically.

Greisner choked.

"Very smart," he said, jerking out each word, "but"—his face livid now—"the time is soon coming when . . . Swine of an Englishman," he went on after a further struggle with his rage that almost completely robbed him of breath, "you do not realise that my Beloved Leader," and in spite of the paroxysm of passion with which he was swept, he swung his arm upwards in the Ronstadtian national salute, "has forged a weapon against which you can have no defence should he decide on war."

Tiger blew his nose with resounding effect.

"I beg your pardon," he replied amiably; "that's very interesting! What is it, old cock—a machine-gun worked by electricity? A little bird has whispered that this new gadget of yours wasn't very successful when you tried it out at manœuvres. Or is it a battalion of camouflaged tanks—you know, the ones with three-ply sides, painted over to look like steel—the ones that broke down so badly outside Bina last year? . . . And—oh, excuse me, once again, Greisner—but how is your ear? I forgot to ask you before."

The Ronstadtian rushed forward. His right hand gripped a revolver which he had whipped from his pocket.

But Standish, grim enough now, was too quick for him; stepping swiftly to one side, he caught the man's right wrist and gave it a quick, sudden twist. With a howl of agony, Greisner dropped the gun.

Standish put his foot on the weapon.

"You fool!" he said sternly; "I don't suppose you have the wit to understand, but I've just saved your life! If that gun had gone off, our fellows would have rushed in here and strung you up with your own braces . . . and a

nice sight you would have looked, wouldn't you, hanging in your pants from a hook in the ceiling—and all in front of soft-hearted Miriam, too! . . . And now I really must be off," he added; "as I've already told you, I want my bed—I missed my after-lunch nap to-day and that always plays me up. . . . No, don't either of you trouble; I'll find my own way out: you see, I've *two* guns now," showing a second revolver which he had taken from his pocket, "and, with my nerves in their present wretched state, who knows but what they might not go off?" Backing to the door, he said a final word. "By the way, where's Carlimero? This party doesn't seem complete without him."

He left the three staring after him.

CHAPTER XXVI

AN EXILE RETURNS

THE man was small in stature, insignificant in appearance, bore the dejected appearance of a beaten dog—but was master of the situation. The indescribable tortures which he had undergone during the past three years did not allow him to demonstrate this fact in any degree, but it was nevertheless true.

He had been brought—this prospective winner of the greatest war in world-history—to the Chancellory, built at a cost exceeding ten million pounds, secretly and under cover of darkness. The sentries at the great bronze entrance-gates were unable to see who this visitor might be—the curtains of the long black official car were too tightly drawn for that—but they stood rigidly and ostentatiously at the salute. Could he have seen them, this man whose body odour nauseated the two high dignitaries who had been deputed to bring him into the presence of the incalculable being whom a maliciously-grinning destiny had raised from the status of an unemployed house

painter to rule over the lives of nearly 80,000,000 people, he would have marvelled.

Yes, he would have marvelled—providing his numbed senses had allowed him to appreciate the true import of what he had seen. He might even have twisted his battered face into the semblance of a smile.

He had been kept in ignorance of where he was going and whom he was to see. All that he knew were the superficial facts: on his return to the country which had used him so ill—a return which he, alone of all his race, had made—he had been interviewed by a member of the Secret Police, a man from whom he instinctively shrank, for the cruel wounds he bore were still unhealed, and treated, to his amazement, not only with civility but with respect. This interrogator, whose flamboyantly decorative uniform spoke of his high rank in perhaps the most damnable corps that the evil mind of man has yet called into being, put a number of questions, especially about his scientific studies—had he, for instance, continued his research work whilst living in exile in Belgium?—and then, placing a bundle of notes on the table, said he would like to have another talk later that day.

And now here he was, being taken somewhere as the result of that further talk—and being still treated with marked respect. It was very strange—almost as strange as his own action in returning voluntarily to the land which had treated him worse than a leper.

A leper! The flashing of the word through his mind caused his starved body to shake with silent laughter—laughter so horrible that, if his companions could have read the riddle of it, they—steeped in blood to their eyebrows as they were—would have been appalled. As it was, they put this twitching of their precious cargo down to natural hysteria. . . . The stinking swine must know where they were taking him, although they had not said a word. You could never read the minds of such creatures; they were clever. But, of course, he must know they were taking him to see Kuhnreich.

The car swung in through the great gates and came to a halt in the huge courtyard beyond. The scene, and the

attendant trappings, were pure Wagnerian: in true keeping with the unbalanced mind of the mystic who had planned them in one of his waking nightmares.

The returned exile heard a voice say in his ear.

"You will please get out here."

The voice was still respectful. Otherwise, the man who had endured so much in one hell-ridden concentration camp might have thought that he had been brought to another. Not that, astonishingly, he would have minded: he now had the power of Life and Death—especially Death—over his former torturers. Those broodings during the three years he had spent in Dachau had brought their fruit.

He got out of the car, as bidden—still meek, still subdued, still scarcely human and still smelling abominably—and awaited further orders.

Instantly a vast horde of uniformed guards wrapped him about.

At a sign he began to walk.

The Three who had turned modern civilisation into a Satanised mockery were in the great room to which these guards had had orders to escort him. Walking quickly up and down, stopping every now and then to run twitching fingers through his mop of unruly hair, was the Dictator himself—Kurt Kuhnreich of unholy fame, the man destined to go down in history as the most hated human being since Nero. Oskar Kabisch, a Field Marshal now whereas only a few years ago he had been a motorcycle pedlar, gigantic in girth, apparelled in one of the musical-comedy uniforms of his own designing, watched these perambulations with a half-concealed smile. Unlike the man he styled in public "his Glorious Leader" and in private by a much less laudatory title, Oskar Kabisch had no illusions about either himself or those who shared the administrative spoils in the biggest ramp in the history of a nation that has devoted most of its apparently inexhaustible energies to despoiling its neighbours' property. Least of all did Kabisch have any illusions regarding the cause he served. He, like others of the Higher

Hierarchy, had supported the revolution because he saw himself with his overwhelming dynamism, getting in on the ground floor and seizing a lion's share of the swag. During the past six years he had lived up to his resolve, so that now, whatever happened to the present Government of which he was such a prominent member, he, presumably, felt secure. Why not? He had roughly £2,000,000 tucked safely away in various South American banks. True, one of the realistic French newspapers, in printing this "highly interesting" item of news, had suggested that the owner of this wealth "wrung traitorously from the poverty of a sorely-tried people who had been deceived and deluded as no people had ever been deceived and deluded before," might find some difficulty in getting out of the country he had so basely betrayed once the truth was known in Ronstadt, but, for the moment, Oskar Kabisch was postponing this problem; he had plenty of other things to think about.

The third member of the Triumvirate was a pale-faced, thin-lipped man in the forties, dressed in civilian clothes, whose rat-trap of a mouth was his most prominent feature—that was, if the venomous hate always smouldering in his sunken eyes and leaping instantly into fire at the mention of the country he longed to see destroyed, was ignored.

Von Hagenberger had formerly been the Ronstadtian Ambassador at the Court of St. James's. Now he was Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. This transformation had been rendered only possible by a procedure which no other country but Ronstadt would have tolerated. Like many another *nouveau riche*, this former seller of wholesale groceries had become fired by insensate ambition—especially after listening to the demagogic rantings of Kuhnreich. Joining up with the man who had promised to make Ronstadt the World's Greatest Power in History, he had so flattered the other that he had received quick promotion. To be fair to Von Hagenberger, he certainly possessed more culture—or, at least, a more imposing cultural veneer—than the rest of the adventurers Kuhnreich had enlisted under his banner. All these belonged to the ruffianly type which a revolution in any country

will always throw up like foul creatures dislodged from the Pit.

Von Hagenberger, in the course of his career as a traveller in wholesale groceries, had gone outside Ronstadt. He had sold his wares in both France and England. Consequently, he spoke both these languages; and, consequently—for such was the queer reasoning put forward by Kuhnreich himself when the members of the Old Guard of the movement had protested—he must possess a comprehensive, profound and intimate knowledge of foreign affairs!

The mistakes Von Hagenberger had made in London whilst acting as Ronstadtian Ambassador to the Court of St. James's had been caused mainly by his overweening arrogance and the attempts, all unsuccessful, to ride roughshod over everyone with whom he came into contact. He was a new type in diplomacy and, naturally enough, he was deeply resented. Yet human nature being what it is, Von Hagenberger found certain questionable elements in Mayfair and on the outskirts of official circles who declared him to be "such a charming man—and quite misunderstood, you know."

But, taken as a whole, his stay in London could only be termed an ignominious failure. As a consequence, mainly because of the icy snubs he received through his own crass stupidity both as a diplomat and as a man, he declared openly at a farewell party which he gave at the Embassy on the eve of his return to Menke, that he hated Britain, and that time would show how important this hatred would be.

These were the three men, then, who stared at the returned exile as that insignificant-looking person was brought into the enormous room.

The more important of the two officials in the Secret Political Police, who had acted as the exile's escort, upflung his arm in the Ronstadtian national salute.

"Your Excellency," he said in a tone of reverence, "this is Herr Matthias."

At the words, the covert grin on Field-Marshal Oskar Kabisch's face deepened, whilst the thin lips of Von

Hagenberger seemed to close even more tightly over his rat-trap of a mouth.

But the effect on the Dictator of Ronstadt was entirely different. He hurled himself round, and became a dynamo of human energy. Characteristically enough, he started a tempestuous harangue as though he were addressing a mass meeting of thousands of his fanatical adherents instead of speaking conversationally to one man.

"You have been brought here," he roared to the visitor, "in order that you may be given the opportunity to perform a glorious service for your Fatherland!"

Jacob Matthias bowed.

"It was with the object of giving what poor help I might, that I went to the Embassy in Brussels," he ventured to reply, in a thin, quavery voice.

Kuhnreich waved the words on one side. He might have been brushing a fly from his nose.

"Listen to me!" he went on: "I've already told you that you have been brought here—to me, the greatest Ronstadtian who has ever lived, the man who will go down in history as the maker of the most powerful nation the world has ever known—in order, as I have said, to be given an opportunity to render glorious service to your Fatherland."

The returned exile bowed again. Even on the surface, this statement was a travesty. Jacob Matthias, as his name betokened, was a Jew—and never since the first wave of anti-Semitism had arisen like a poisonous plague in the world had his race and religion been persecuted as they had been persecuted throughout Ronstadt during the past six years; that was, ever since Kurt Kuhnreich and his gang of hooligans had come into power.

Kuhnreich proceeded.

"In this mighty hour of Ronstadt's destiny," he thundered, "what do we find? We find our beloved Fatherland surrounded by bitter and ruthless enemies! They are led by the warmongers in Britain, the dastardly Churchills, Edens, Duff-Coopers! Their plan is to encircle us with a ring of steel and starve our women and children by means of the blockade. Oh, I know that war has

not yet been declared—but it may come at any moment! And I must be prepared! We, the rulers of Ronstadt, must make a mighty effort to overthrow the evil machinations that are plotted against us—and it must be a quick war when it comes. I am a man of action, and when I let loose my thunderbolts, they must go straight to the heart of the enemy!”

The ranter stopped for a moment to thrust the fingers of his left hand through his unruly hair, one lock of which hung perpetually over his left eye. Then he fixed the returned exile with a basilisk stare.

“The Chief of my Secret Police”—here the Jew recoiled as though the speaker had dealt him a blow—“has brought me your *dossier*. From that, I have gathered that you were a medical research worker of international fame—is that true?”

“It is true, Your Excellency.”

“Is it also true that it was you who discovered the cure for leprosy?”

“I had that honour, Your Excellency.”

“Then I now call upon you in the name of Ronstadt, the country of your birth, the country which enabled you to produce your genius, to help your Fatherland!”

Behind the speaker, Field-Marshal Kabisch and Von Hagenberger, hating each other as they did, exchanged a look of significance. They knew the vacillating mind of the man they served too well to be surprised at any change of front which his impetuous and unbalanced nature might make, but this *volte-face*—calling for help upon a member of the very race that Kuhnreich for years had systematically and ruthlessly pillaged and tortured—was almost too much even for their strong stomachs.

“You have but to command me, Your Excellency,” replied the Jew in a humble tone. He was now the cringing Jew of history, cowering before his tyrannical tormentors, and eager to propitiate the enemy. “In what way can I serve you, Your Excellency?” he faltered.

Kuhnreich’s pop-eyes—the eyes of a true megalomaniac—turned on him hypnotically.

“The world knows me as a man of peace—as a man

who never breaks his word—I shall not break my word with you, Matthias; you have been promised that any wrong that might have been done to you in the past shall be rectified; all your property will be restored.”

The Jew bowed low.

“I am sufficiently grateful, Your Excellency,” he murmured.

“The victory which I have planned over the hated Britain—the country which has always been jealous of our beloved Fatherland, and has never ceased to conspire against her—must be quick. I am a man of action. . . . Tell me, Matthias, in your estimation, is there any way—any way at all—in which you can help me to achieve this victory?”

“Were you referring to any form of bacteriological warfare, Your Excellency?” came the question.

Kuhnreich stamped his foot like an ill-tempered child that has broken its toy.

“My advisers tell me that there is no form of bacteriological warfare which would be swift and sure enough to achieve my purpose. You must do better than that, Matthias.”

The Jew bowed again.

“There may be a way, Your Excellency,” he said—and then as he spoke that obnoxious body odour which seemed to be an integral part of him, filled the Dictator’s nostrils, causing him to retch.

Kabisch and Von Hagenberger stepped backwards. They, too, must have smelt that terrible stench.

“Do you mean to say you know a way?” roared Kuhnreich, his voice now cracked with excitement.

For the third time the Jew bowed low.

“Yes, I know a way, Your Excellency,” he said.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BLACK SPOT

"WHAT is it?" Kuhnreich's eyes now looked as though they would jump from his head.

"If I might sit down, Your Excellency . . ."

The speaker looked so exhausted that he threatened to drop.

It was Field-Marshal Kabisch who thrust forward a chair. He did so with a foot: he would have disdained to use a hand to help a swine of a Jew. He would rob a Jew; he would blackmail a Jew—wasn't it through these two sources that he had been able to pile up the couple of million pounds he had so prudently set aside for the day when, Kuhnreich's tyranny overcome by the fury of the self-respecting side of the nation, he would have to flee from Ronstadt? But his honour as a soldier and as a gentleman would not permit him to lift a hand to help a Jew.

"Sit down, Matthias," the Dictator ordered.

The wretched creature collapsed into the chair. As he did so, the stench from his person seemed to gather strength. Von Hagenberger, whose delicate nature forced him always to use perfume when he was watching executions, looked revolted.

"Get him a drink, Kabisch," now said Kuhnreich. A man who never touched liquor himself—he sustained his warrior spirit on chocolate and milk—he knew the effect that strong drink had upon other people; and he didn't want this fool to faint now. Not likely!

Kabisch forced the brandy down the exile's throat, holding his nose the while.

Matthias gulped, and then coughed.

"Are you better?" fiercely demanded Kuhnreich.

Another fit of coughing seized the Jew.

"Yes . . . Your Excellency," he managed to stammer.

"Then waste no more time—my patience is exhausted; tell me what you have in mind."

The returned exile rubbed his thin hands together.

"Your Excellency will forgive me if I mention the fact that I spent over three years in Dachau Concentration Camp," he started; "during that time I had plenty of time for thinking. Naturally enough, the main trend of my thoughts was about my profession. There was so much yet to do in medical research. It was true, that I had perfected what seemed a permanent cure for the scourge of leprosy, but there was still so much to do."

The Triumvirate became impatient. What was the fool babbling about?

"You must be brief; waste no words!" curtly said Kuhnreich.

The words appeared to recall the returned exile to his senses.

"I am sorry, Your Excellency," he replied contritely; "I was allowing my thoughts to become uncontrolled . . . that was one thing I learned in the Dachau Concentration Camp, Your Excellency—to control my thoughts."

Field-Marshal Oskar Kabisch thought it expedient to put in a word.

"It is the duty of every true lover of the Fatherland to control his thoughts—and to harness them to the sole use of our Glorious Leader!" he roared in his bull's voice. The words had been used by him so frequently in public speeches that he had almost come to believe in them himself.

The Jew lowered his head before the tornado.

Kabisch patted his vast paunch complacently; though he didn't possess the sadistic nature of the unspeakable Gestauber, Chief of the Ronstadtian Secret Police, yet he liked to see others—especially Jews, whom he ranked below the beasts of the field—cower before him. It gave him a sense of power, and enabled him to forget the days when he was trying to earn a living selling motor-cycles on the barter system.

He would not have been so complacent had he been able to see into this particular Jew's mind. It was true

what Matthias had said: during the three years' unmitigated hell that he had spent in the loathsome Dachau Concentration Camp he had learned to control his thoughts; if he had not done so he would have gone mad.

He had also learned—in Kabisch's own words—to harness them to a sole use. But that use had not been the glorification of Kurt Kuhnreich—the purpose to which Matthias had bent his magnificent powers during every possible moment of those three years (and since) was the destruction and not the further triumphs of the man who, as crazy as any pyromaniac, had made the once great nation of Ronstadt something at which all decent people now metaphorically spat.

Yes, every moment during those three years in which he had been broken physically but kept his soul bright, he had devoted to this purpose.

And he had succeeded! The lives of all these three men, on whose shoulders were blood-crimes that would never be forgotten so long as Time itself existed, were now as surely in his keeping as though he were God. Even more surely: God might, in His infinite mercy, have showed them a little pity; but he wouldn't.

Up till the time he had been taken, in shudderingly humiliating conditions, a prisoner to the Dachau Concentration Camp, he had devoted his life to the task of trying to assist humanity, but once there he had given his mind over to revenge—revenge, not on mankind as a whole, although he felt he had every excuse, but on the rulers of the *régime* who were directly responsible for the intolerable conditions under which millions of his fellow-countrymen now had to exist. The People's Freedom secret wireless system, the last time he had listened-in to it, had called upon every true lover of Ronstadt to assist in the task of freeing the country from its present awful plight. "Each of you can play his part," the ringing voice had passionately declaimed; "the worker in the factory, the soldier in his barracks, the clerk in his counting-house . . . the scientist in his laboratory. Unite and strive for freedom!"

"The scientist in his laboratory." He was a scientist,

a world-famous scientist, but he hadn't a laboratory. He had been driven out of it at the end of a whip, whilst rubber truncheons had beat about his shoulders—he, who had received the homage of the whole medical profession for ridding the world of another terrible scourge, had been prevented from carrying on his work because of his race!

No, he hadn't a laboratory, but he still had a brain, and he used it. Used it so that by the time he was released from his sentence (with fresh tortures and humiliations on the morning of deliverance; being "a swine of a Jew," his gaolers naturally were reluctant to let him go), he had completed the formula in his mind. He only had to apply it. His old colleague, Horst, to whom he confided the secret once he had joined him in Brussels, was aghast.

"You cannot do this thing!" Horst had said, his voice trembling.

He had smiled back at him; it was a mockery of a smile, no doubt, but he couldn't help that—when those guards at Dachau had cut the left side of his face open, some nerves had been severed. . . .

"But I can—and shall," he had replied.

"And the rest of humanity?"

"The rest of humanity must take care of itself: the vital thing is that Kuhnreich and his gang must be annihilated. . . . You will swear to me that you will not say one word about this to anyone, Heinrich?"

And Heinrich Horst, because he was a Jew, because he, too, had suffered and because in his heart he thought that Matthias had been driven crazy through the treatment he had received at Dachau and did not fully realise what he was saying, gave the promise.

It was half an hour later.

"And you are sure there is no cure or antidote to this?" Kuhnreich, his nostrils dilated, had asked.

"There is no cure or antidote, Your Excellency," was the reply. "This will be a new disease, an entirely fresh pestilence. Medical science, such as exists to-day, will

have no knowledge of it; therefore it cannot hope to cope with it."

"And it will spread quickly throughout a country?"

"It will claim millions of fresh victims a day; the contagion will be ten thousand times more rapid than anything that has ever been experienced."

The man who had already slain millions looked respectfully at the man who had promised him world-conquest.

"I thank you in the name of all Ronstadt," he said; and then, whilst Field-Marshal Kabisch gaped and Von Hagenberger looked appalled, he held out his hand.

"In saying that, I am willing to forget you are a Jew," he said magnanimously.

As though overcome—his whole body shook—the exile who had returned to place his services at the disposal of his country, caught the hand the speaker extended and pressed it to his lips.

It was only after he had gone, escorted as before by two prominent members of the Secret Police, that a state approaching sanity descended on at least two members of the Triumvirate.

"To me," declared Field-Marshal Oskar Kabisch, "it sounds like a madman's dream."

"Let us never forget that the swine is a Jew!" supported Von Hagenberger.

Kuhnreich turned on both of them, shouting furiously.

"Does it matter what he is?" he shrieked; "isn't it sufficient that he has an entirely new weapon which I can use against the accursed British?"

When Kuhnreich was in that mood (he would be varying his screams very shortly by calling upon God to witness that in all that he did he was guided by Divine wisdom!), there was nothing that could be done; the maniac had to be left alone.

But the gross Kabisch, thinking as usual of himself, was tenacious enough to have a word; this was just before he turned to follow Von Hagenberger out of the room.

"Well, I hope to God that none of us gets it!" he said;

"anyhow, we shall always be able to tell—look out for that black spot on the palm of your hand, Kurt!"

Kuhnreich, shrieking curses, ordered him gone.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PORTRAIT OF A DICTATOR

KUHNREICH rammed his clenched fist against a bell. A personal guard materialised so closely that the Dictator might have been Abanazar rubbing the magic ring.

"I am to be alone," he said.

"Yes, Your Excellency."

He went out, and there followed the sounds of tramping feet, of doors being closed, bolts being driven home, weapons grounded. Kuhnreich's ever-present fear was that someone amongst the People whom he so frequently declared were at the back of everything he did, would show his loyalty by trying to assassinate him. That was the secret reason of the insomnia which kept him awake throughout the hours of darkness and which no neurologist—what stories these same neurologists could have told!—throughout Ronstadt and the neighbouring states had been able to cure. This man whom Destiny had cursed from birth and for whose death the whole civilised world was awaiting in breathless expectancy, slept in a different room each night in his 'gigantic Chancellory—even though the number of his guards, each of whom had sworn a solemn oath pledging himself to instant suicide should anything happen to his "Beloved Leader," was two hundred and fifty!

The story of Kurt Kuhnreich and his rise to power was one of the strangest that history had ever recorded; it outstripped fiction to such an extent that even the imaginings of the writers of the wildest sensational novels could not have coped with it.

Here was a man, largely illiterate, certainly mentally

unbalanced, who, by sheer hypnotic ranting, had so impressed his will upon the masses of his country that millions considered him a god. Even although—as critics pointed out—such a condition could not have been possible in any other country but Ronstadt, a nation which, suffering from an apparently incurable and chronic inferiority-complex, demanded to be drilled, disciplined and treated like serfs, this was a very remarkable circumstance.

Kuhnreich had risen to supreme power on the solemn pledge that he lived and worked solely for the good of the people. The latter, poor, deluded dupes, believed this, in spite of the fact that they could read in Kuhnreich's own autobiography that he regarded the Ronstadtian masses as "mutton-headed sheep."

Yet, what did this megalomaniac do directly he was in the saddle? Breaking every solemn promise he had given, not only to the other European Governments, but to his own people, he flagrantly set out to revive the brutal war-instincts which for hundreds of years had been perhaps the main characteristics of the Ronstadt people. In open defiance of the rest of Western Europe, he secretly built up an enormous army and an even more impressive air-force. Always with Terror in mind as his principal prospective weapon, he intended these thousands of bombers to be used at the first opportunity.

Once he considered himself sufficiently well-equipped, he started on his campaign of annexing smaller neighbouring states. The democracies, willing to believe that he was sincere in his professed desire to include only his own nationals, stood by until Volnia was threatened.

Realising that if they did not protest now, their own turn for eventual destruction would come, France and Britain signed an alliance with Volnia.

Any sane man would then have hesitated, but Kuhnreich was like a tiger who had tasted blood. He refused to listen to reason or even prudence: although the President of the United States of America cabled appealing to him; although the Pope sent a similar message; although a group of smaller powers met and passed a resolution beseeching him not to plunge first Europe and then the

whole world into devastating war, Kuhnreich, the once out-of-work labourer, now promoted Dictator, urged on by his group of power-crazed gangsters, was actually considering hurling the lighted torch into the powder magazine. Only one thing was holding him back—the solemn assurance which he had just received from the British Ambassador that if he did start this abominable war, Britain, together with France, would throw their hats into the ring from the first shot being fired. Crazy as he was, a mental “case” who should have been receiving proper treatment instead of being permitted to wreak untold suffering upon mankind, this threat had made him pause.

If only he could defeat this cursed enemy! If only he could counter the warning he had been given with an avalanche of terror so overwhelming that Britain would be struck to her knees before she could put into effect her blockade!

That had been his pagan prayer! It had seemed a vain, an impossible wish until someone in the Secret Police had whispered the name of Jacob Matthias to the unspeakable Gestauber, and he, in turn, had whispered it into the ear of the person he referred to as “The Superman.”

And now his prayer had been answered! Matthias wouldn't deceive him—this swine of a Jew was only too thankful for being given the chance to serve him—look how he kissed his hand!

His madman's soul exulted. Kuhnreich did not stop to consider the results of what he contemplated doing—how the whole of mankind, Ronstadt herself included, might be caught up in the grip of this ghastly new pestilence to which there was no known cure or even antidote. Well had he been called “Civilisation's No. 1 Criminal”; well had *The Times* in a leading article, evidently written at white-heat, stated that “Evil, be thou my good,” had during six tragic years been “the unvarying apostrophe of Kuhnreichian diplomacy.”

Another writer had used much more burning words:

“This gutter lout from a provincial town, who

graduated to political prominence as a police spy, recognises no moral law known to civilised people," he had said.

"Around him stand men of infamous character, without principle or honour, perfect instruments of his destructive will.

"From the beginning of his career, Kuhnreich has lied, tricked, betrayed, murdered.

"He has done his best to exterminate culture and intelligence, exiling the highest minds and spirits, committing the fruits of their genius to the flames.

"His whole career is strewn with betrayals.

"He ordered the murder of his best friends, his sworn comrades, whose only crime was to demand that the Party remained true to the principles of its social programme.

"Year after year the stream of blood through which he waded to power has risen higher. Now he is in it to the armpits. Soon it will drown him.

"Evil was the day that saw his birth; glorious will be the hour when he ceases to breathe.

"Coldly, without passion, the civilised world demands that Kuhnreich shall hang.

"So long as he lives there will be enmity between nations, fostered by his insane striving for world power."

Unable to read any language but his own, these scathing words had been kept from him, but in the Propaganda Department, which was run at such enormous expense, they had evoked sardonic chuckles: Künzel, the club-footed dwarf, who was now venting his spleen and getting his revenge because years before no one could be found to produce his turgid plays and publish his even more rubbishy novels, read them through a second time; rendering ostentatious lip-service to Kuhnreich (it was Künzel who had first coined the title "Our Beloved Leader"), he secretly hated the man he had to blazon to the world as a godlike creature. Like all the others in the Kuhnreich Hierarchy, he had feathered his nest against the time when an outraged nation would force him to flee.

Kuhnreich rang his bell.

"Send my secretary to me," he told the guard.

He had decided. The die was to be cast. Britain was to be attacked before she could attack herself. Within a few days the greatest empire the world had ever known would be in ruins.

CHAPTER XXIX

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

To a man whose vanity was almost as inordinate as that of the master he served, the experience through which he had just passed was maddening and Karl Greisner reacted to it by glaring at his two companions in Valeria Ceccato's flat.

"A thousand devils!" he roared; "why didn't you two do something?"

The man who called himself Ludx, and who now looked, with his ridiculously rosy face, like a cherub taking an academic interest in the workings of Hell, shrugged his shoulders.

"We left it to you, Herr Greisner, having confidence that you would be able to handle the situation."

Greisner, conscious that the other was mocking him, roared again.

"I give you a word of warning, Rahusen," he said, thrusting his face close up to the other's; "in future keep out of my affairs."

"But the man Standish is *my* affair; I knew him long before you; in fact, I feel a more or less proprietary interest in him," was the exasperating reply.

"The past is finished in more than one respect," came the curt comment.

"No doubt Signor Brassiano is fully aware of the fact," the other could not stop himself saying. "Now, before you go, Herr Greisner, allow me to give you a word of

warning. I do so with the best intentions, and because I have been longer in this game of Blind Man's Bluff than yourself: never underestimate either your possible friends or your certain enemies. I did that in the beginning with this man Standish, but I learned my lesson. And the same thing applies to other people."

The insinuation at the back of the words appeared to register. Greisner flushed to the top of his closely-cropped, bullet head.

Then, with a glare at the speaker, and a brusque nod in the direction of the woman, he stamped out.

"What an unspeakable race!" said Valeria Ceccato with searing contempt; "how could you ever have brought yourself to work for such people?"

The rosy-faced one coughed.

"They paid me well," was his comprehensive answer; "but Greisner certainly is a barbarian in a race of barbarians."

Twenty-four hours later, the man on whom this stricture had been passed was sitting in his Mount Street flat, smoking a cigar and absorbed in his thoughts. Greisner was perplexed, which accounted for the heavy frown above his eyes. Had he said too much at that woman's flat the night before? The temptation had been so strong that, perhaps, he had been too precipitate. The swine Standish was a cool head and a shrewd devil; he wasn't the type to miss anything of possible value.

Greisner cursed as he thought of this possibility, but a moment later he had reassured himself with the reflection that, after all, he had only made a general statement. He had said nothing in particular. Standish had probably decided that it had been a characteristic boast—the whole of the Kuhnreich diplomacy was based on preposterous-sounding blackmail, bluff and chicanery, which wouldn't have deceived an intelligent child. Mendacity of the worst—and therefore of the most stupid—description was the keynote.

Griesner would not have admitted this, of course, if he had been challenged; like other prominent members of the

Party, he could see only one side of any question; he was a true disciple of the paranoic he served.

Yet he hadn't been bluffing when he had made that threat to Standish the night before; which was why he was now so afraid he might possibly have given something away. Kuhnreich had made many wild statements in hysteria, but, from the words Gestauber had used in the instructions he had sent, there could be no doubt but what the Leader really had secured some new weapon of incalculable potency and was keeping it up his sleeve. Moreover, he now intended with characteristic genius and daring, to use this without any warning.

Getting up from his chair, Greisner crossed to a wall safe, concealed behind the wireless cabinet. From this, after he had used the combination, he took a single sheet of paper. It was the decoded version of the message sent to him at the Ronstadtian Embassy by Gestauber, the Chief of the Secret Political Police at Menke.

It read:

Beloved and Glorious Leader pays you great honour in selecting you as chief assistant to H.N. in using new and terrible weapon overthrow Britain Stop H.N. arrives with weapon shortly Stop Another message will follow giving time and place Stop Heil Kuhnreich!

The second message had arrived only an hour after the first: the Leader was wasting no time. It paid him a further compliment and gave him definite details of the arrival of H.N. in England—H.N., the man who was never referred to by name throughout Ronstadt, but only by his initials. When his initials weren't used, he was referred to as "The Long Knife." H.N. was the Party's official assassin; he waded in blood and reeked of corruption.

And now "The Long Knife" was coming secretly to England—and he was to work with him!

Greisner glowed with pride as he re-read the two messages which he had fastened together. If he had obeyed the inflexible rule of the Ronstadt Intelligence Service, he

would have destroyed the papers after committing their contents to memory. It was his vanity that had made him keep them. Gestauber had said in a postscript to the second message: "I have brought your name personally to the particular notice of our Glorious and Beloved Leader. . . ."

The words in any case would have been flattering, but, with the special confirmation he had, Greisner considered them momentous. As one who had worked behind the scenes in the Capital before being sent to London, he had been given an intimate close-up of the violent personal jealousies which every so often convulsed the Party and would have destroyed it completely if Kuhnreich had not brought his authority to bear.

The Leader himself had named the mammoth Field-Marshal Kabisch as his successor ("should anything happen to me") and after Kabisch the colourless Robert Seidel, always referred to as Kuhnreich's deputy.

Greisner had laughed to himself when he first heard this announcement coming over the official wireless from Menke. He knew the truth—which was something very different from what the Ronstadtian public were being told.

The truth was that Gestauber, the most ambitious man in the Kuhnreich Hierarchy, was determined to eliminate all his possible rivals—especially Field-Marshal Kabisch and Robert Seidel, whose preposterously bushy eyebrows gave him such an absurd appearance—and take over the reins himself.

That was, after Kuhnreich was dead. Gestauber was said to be a person without one redeeming quality. This was not quite true: for so long as Kuhnreich lived he would serve the Dictator as faithfully as he had always done in the past; there would be no treachery on his part; but directly the Leader died, either naturally (medical experts were united in declaring that he would end his days as a raving lunatic), by his own hand or by the bullet or knife of an assassin—he had millions of enemies—Gestauber was determined to "purge" all his rivals. He was in a strong position to do so, seeing that he commanded

in the various branches of the Secret Police, who took their sole orders from him, a private army of over 250,000 men.

And with Gestauber as No. 1, strongly entrenched and ruthlessly efficient in beating off his enemies, he (Greisner) would be given a big position; why, he might even be promoted to Cabinet rank. . . .

It was an intoxicating vision.

The night, which had been very still—he was sitting in a room at the back of the flat—now became hideous with discordant sound. Someone was singing—or trying to sing. A vile wretch of a street-beggar, trying to get a few coppers for his bed and supper, he supposed. It was scandalous for this to happen in aristocratic Mount Street, and it couldn't be tolerated. He would go out and tell the creature. . . .

Rool Brittanier, Brittanier rools the waves. Britons, Britons, never, never, NEVER will be slaves.

Benny Bannister stopped his dreadful attempt at vocalism and wondered if he had suffered enough. The gov'nor should have had time by now. . . .

"Stop that awful row! If you don't I'll call the police!"

Benny felt a glow pass through him. Blimey, what luck—here was the perisher himself! He had succeeded beyond his wildest expectation.

His Nibs in person! Well, well!

But he had to continue to do his stuff.

"I was only tryin' ter earn a few coppers for me doss, sir," he whined. (How he would have liked to slosh the blighter one!)

"*Himmel*, then go somewhere else to do it," he was told.

The street-singer rubbed a hand over his unshaven chin; Tiger Standish had warned him that attention to detail was essential.

"Can't you spare a poor bloke a copper yourself, sir?" he enquired.

"No, damn you! It is only in England that such a scandal would be allowed!"

"England's all right; it's the microbes that come over 'ere to live in it that's wrong," came the retort.

"You dare to insult me!" shouted the critic.

"I'll do more than that, you lump of nasty suet, if you try any more of that stuff off on me—can't a bloke try ter earn a 'onest livin' if he wants ter?"

"Wot's the matter, mate?"

A taxi-driver, pulling up, leaned sideways to put the enquiry.

Benny responded warmly.

"'Ere was I, tryin' ter earn a tanner or so ter pay for me doss ter-night, chum, and along comes this puffed-up slab sayin' 'e'd 'ave me run in! Is this a free country or ain't it?"

"It ain't, mate—that's the trouble," replied the other member of the proletariat; "foreigner, ain't 'e?" he went on, staring at Greisner as though the latter was something obscene.

"'R! Looks like it, anyway . . . well, s'long, chum; I'll try Green Street; may 'ave better luck there."

"Wait a minute; 'ere's a tanner," and the friendly Jehu held out the coin.

"Nah! I ain't spongin' on me own class!" replied the street-singer, "but thank yer kindly all the syne, chum."

When Greisner returned to the flat he was in a raging temper. To have been treated in such a way by a pair of low-down Communists made him feel like murder. What a country! In Ronstadt he would have called an S.S. Guard and had them sent to a concentration camp straightaway.

His feelings were not improved by falling over a chair as he returned to the room where he had been sitting. He then noticed that the room was in darkness. But he hadn't turned off the light!

Like a cold douche to his rage came the fear that somehow he had been tricked. That street-singer had fooled him. Why? What was the object?

Close by him something stirred.

He swung round—to meet a blow clean on the jaw which, after rocking him on his feet, sent him crashing senseless to the floor.

“O.K., guv’nor?”

“O.K., Benny. Step on it.”

“Did you get wot you wanted?” as the car swung into the Park.

“I got—and I gave, Benny, thus living up to the truest Christian principles. But this is only the first move in the game. . . . I shall want you again, Benny.”

“O.K., guv’nor. Not to sing, I ‘ope?”

“Not to sing, Benny—and here’s a tip,” as though confiding a great secret; “if you ever want to go into another man’s flat on the quiet, make love to the man’s mistress—friend Greisner’s was a splendacious blonde, most attractive—and borrow her key. You won’t forget that, Benny?”

The man at the wheel of the Bentley grunted.

“Splendacious blondes aren’t in my line, guv’nor, worse luck; I can’t go ‘igher than red-headed barmaids.”

CHAPTER XXX

THE MISSING CENTRE-FORWARD

MEANWHILE, London did its best to pursue its normal life—the theatres and cinemas were open; the restaurants were packed to capacity; many Americans who had been urged by their Ambassador to return home before international conditions rendered it difficult for them to do so, preferred to stay on in the city to watch developments. Some of them even volunteered for one or another form of National Service and were annoyed and dumbfounded when these offers were politely refused. They did not

understand the British way—which is to carry out a job alone once it has been undertaken.

And the man-in-the-street, seething with rage at what he read in the newspapers about the duplicity and general bad faith of the man who had convulsed the world with his abominations, was resolved to enjoy himself until such time as the balloon went up. Which was why the Swifts' ground on this particular Saturday afternoon was crammed.

The Swifts, perhaps the most popular professional side that London has ever known, were at home to Wollington Park, and, as the two clubs were running a neck-and-neck race for the leading position in the First Division table, the enthusiasm of this gigantic crowd of over 80,000 vibrated round the Highton enclosure. Forgotten for the moment was the tense international situation, growing more acute every hour; like Drake playing his game of bowls on Plymouth Hoe before starting out to smash the Spanish Armada, these Englishmen, determined to do their duty when the Call came—most of them were already enlisted in some form or other of National Service—put aside their worries and concentrated on their favourite sport.

The one regret they had was that the famous amateur centre-forward of the Swifts—the popular idol, Tiger Standish—was not playing. A report had been printed in the previous night's newspapers that he had injured himself in training, and that consequently he would be only a spectator of that day's titanic struggle.

A great cheer went up when a smiling-faced, broad-shouldered man, said to be Standish, was pointed out by the spectators in the enclosure below the grandstand.

"There 'e is, my boy," a father said proudly to his son; "the finest centre-forward, bar none, now playing. And that fellow with the funny face sitting next to him is Benny Bannister, who used to play for England at centre-half and is now Tiger's servant."

"Why do they call Standish 'Tiger,' Dad?" enquired the receiver of this information.

His parent looked aghast.

"Is this how you spend your time when you're at school?"

he retorted angrily; "Standish is called 'Tiger,' my boy, because when he's playing he's just like a tiger on the ball; that's why."

Young Unhopeful asked another question.

"If that funny-faced man is his servant, Dad, why do they sit together?"

"Because Mr. Standish, although a real toff, is also a real sport," was the reply; "and now eat your sweets and don't ask me any more silly questions or I shan't bring you again."

The man sitting by Benny Bannister's side leaned down to whisper.

"They seem pleased to see me," he remarked.

"Of course they are," was the prompt reply; "ain't you Tiger Standish?"

He grinned as he uttered the words.

The match proved not nearly so thrilling as had been expected, and the general opinion was that this defect could be traced directly to the fact that the famous centre-forward of the Swifts was missing from the home front-line.

Many remarks to this effect were passed to the man walking out by Benny Bannister's side, but the recipient said nothing.

Perhaps he was too modest.

As the fast-driven car loomed opposite him, appearing as a phantom of the nerve-ridden darkness, Tiger Standish leapt like a gymnast performing a phenomenal feat, and landed on the running-board.

"Stop, if you want to live!" were the words the astonished chauffeur heard. At the same moment he caught the dull gleam of a revolver that was held in the right hand of the masked man who had materialised out of the night in such goblin fashion.

The car slowed down. The chauffeur had seen murder done many times in his own country, but he had no wish to be a victim of early death himself.

Once the car had stopped, Standish turned his attention

to the passenger inside. Thank goodness, the extraordinary secrecy used in this affair had caused the envoy not only to travel alone, but to arrive without welcome of any kind.

He had to act quickly, for every second counted.

"Open that door!" he said sharply to the chauffeur, "and keep your hands away from your clothes—at the first suspicious sign I shall shoot! Remember that!"

The man hesitated, but a sharp prod from the revolver forced him into action. With a philosophic shrug, he opened the main right-hand door of the car.

"*Mein Herr* will be pleased to alight," the masked man said.

"Quick, Benny, into the Bentley and drive like hell! Here's the stuff . . .!"

His voice becoming faint through loss of blood, Standish pushed the leather satchel, which he had to break off by force from the wrist of the Ronstadtian emissary, once the latter had descended into the country road, across to his servant.

Bannister protested.

"But I can't leave you 'ere, guv'nor—those swine 'ave plugged you. . . . Why, you may *die*!"

"Do what I say . . . and be quick . . . they're almost here . . . now. . . ."

The voice failed; the speaker collapsed.

Benny bit his lower lip until the blood came. He was faced with a far greater problem than, in his wildest imaginings, he would ever have thought possible: he had to decide between doing what was his obvious duty to the State Department for which his master had performed this last service, and leaving the man he loved to the mercy of cruel and relentless enemies. He groaned as he picked up the leather satchel, and, bending double, began to run towards the concealed Bentley which was to take him back to London and Sir Harker Bellamy—whom now, he felt, he could have killed without the slightest hesitation or scruple.

The last couple of hours had been like the disordered

workings of some preposterous dream; life had outstripped the cinema.

At seven o'clock Tiger had telephoned, as arranged, and told him where to be with the Bentley. The drive to this lonely part of the Essex coast had been a silent one; scarcely a dozen words had been exchanged between them. But Benny was content; he knew that Tiger had done the first part of the terribly difficult job he had been given, and that they were now on their way to do the second. Together! That knowledge made him proud. Criticise his master for continuing to work for Sir Harker though he might (and this was mainly actuated through consideration of Mrs. Standish), yet once the task was started, he, like Standish, never looked back. B.B. was a good Cockney, and a true Britisher.

Tiger, for once, had not given his henchman his full confidence. Benny had not resented this; he knew that there must be circumstances which forced his master to keep quiet; no doubt the issues were too important—and, with so much at stake, the fewer the people who knew what was afoot, the better. Which was why he, in turn, had not attempted to ask any unnecessary or superfluous questions.

All he had been told was where to drive. Arrived at this desolate spot in the Essex countryside, he had obeyed further instructions and had waited, with the superb engine of the Bentley kept running, whilst Tiger had disappeared into the dense gloom. Where his master had gone, or what he was intending to do, he did not know; it was sufficient from his point of view that he was in this thing, playing a small but vitally important part—and that his own time would come.

It had come now! A couple of minutes before, Standish, running hard, had dropped to his side beneath the hedge, following the sound of revolver shots.

"You're 'it, guv'nor!" he had cried; "is it bad?"

"I don't know, Benny," the reply had come; "but the swine are after me." Then had followed the words which had contained so much urgency.

The last sound that beat upon Standish's consciousness was the rapid throb of the Bentley's engine gradually fading away on the night air. Then, with a smile on his face—for the job had been practically done—he felt oblivion stealing over him like refreshing sleep. He forgot the pain in his chest; he forgot everything but that one essential fact.

CHAPTER XXXI

TOO MANY ENEMIES

HE awoke to find himself being stared at by a number of men, all of whom he knew to be enemies.

Greisner was the first to speak. His voice was hoarse with hate and strained with passion.

"How much do you know?" he roared. "Tell me—or I'll tear every inch of skin off your body with these hands!" raising his fists.

Standish, although feeling like a good imitation of Death, tried to force a characteristic retort.

"Why, it's my old pal, Greisner," he said feebly; "how are you, Greisner?"

The Ronstadtian lowered his hate-convulsed face.

"You still think you can play the fool, then, you swine-dog!" he snarled; "well, let me tell you, you cursed British spy, that you have played the fool for the last time. You are in the Ronstadtian Embassy—does that convey anything to you? You came here the other day of your own free will, but now you are here by my orders. . . . *My orders!*" he repeated, turning to stare belligerently into the face of a man Standish was just able to recognise—his vision was very blurred—as his other enemy, Carlimero.

"I do seem to be in luck," returned the prisoner, making another courageous attempt to rally himself; "all my old friends together. . . . How are you, Carlimero?"

He saw the Caronian's face gleam.

"You take too much on yourself, Greisner," the Military Attaché said before the man he addressed could reply to Standish; "you appear to forget that I represent my country here—and that my country is vitally concerned in this new mystery-move of Herr Kuhnreich."

Greisner brushed him aside.

"I'll deal with you later," he retorted crudely; "your country is merely a puppy led on a string by my Glorious Leader."

The crass insult was too much; the Caronian stepping forward, smacked the speaker across the face.

"Barbarian!" he cried: "I will teach you that you cannot insult Caronia with impunity!"

Someone in the throng uttered a cry of warning. But it was too late: before he could be stopped, before even a restraining hand was lifted, Greisner had snatched a revolver from a near-by table and had shot Carlimer through the heart.

"Take that offal away!" he ordered: "later, we will send a message to Brassiano saying he died from a sudden heart-attack! . . . And now, Standish," Greisner resumed, after the brief pause during which his command was carried out, "I will attend to *you*!"

"It was clever, I admit, to manage that burglary at my flat so neatly: that was how you got to know about to-night, I suppose?"

"If you would be kind enough to let me have a little brandy, I'll be pleased to answer." Thought of his wife forced him to make the request: with the death of Carlimer—regrettable as that had been—one at least of his enemies had been removed. With returning strength, Hope began to stir in him again.

"Let him have it!" curtly replied Greisner, signalling to one of the other men.

"Thank you," said the prisoner, as the small glass was held to his lips: "thank you . . . yes, my dear Greisner," he continued, when he had swallowed about a tablespoonful of the spirit, "it was due to the visit that I paid to your flat in Mount Street that I got on to what was due to happen to-night—the arrival by submarine off the Essex

coast of the distinguished personage I now see standing by your side. By the way, *mein Herr*, I regret I had to use such unorthodox methods, but I'm sure you will be the first to admit that, in the circumstances, it was the obvious thing to do.

"To be fair, Greisner, not very much of the credit—if it can be called 'credit'—attached to this night's business (I am speaking from my country's point of view now, of course, not yours), is due to me. You see, we had wind—oh, never mind how!—that Herr Kuhnreich contemplated something specially characteristic and drastic several days ago; I was merely told to look into it from this end. Now do you understand?"

"I understand too well, swine-dog! But you have done your last piece of spying!"

"Dear me, that's too bad," was the comment; "I didn't expect any bouquets, of course, but I should have thought you might have given me a word of appreciation as from a fellow-craftsman."

"The only appreciation you will get from me is—*this!*" was the reply. Greisner raised the revolver with which he had already killed one man that night. . . .

Outside the side entrance to the Ronstadtian Embassy a caller whose curiously rosy face was puckered into lines of anxiety, continued to argue with the servant who had been roused from his sleep, and was ill-tempered in consequence.

"I tell you again it is impossible to see any of the Embassy staff," the servant said; "they are all in bed."

"Then I will see Herr Greisner—I'm quite sure *he's* not in bed because I happen to know, first, that he is now in the Embassy, and secondly, that he does not sleep here, but at his flat in Mount Street. . . . Now, hurry, man, unless you want me to get you dismissed."

"I have no authority to allow you in to see anyone," the servant replied stolidly.

"*There* is my authority," retorted the late caller; "give that to Herr Greisner." He put a copper disc into the servant's hand.

His manner was so impressive that the other stepped aside.

"I will tell Herr Greisner," he said; "but if I should have done wrong——"

"I'll see that you don't get into trouble," was the quick reply.

Just as his finger was about to pull the trigger, a knock came on the door.

Greisner swung round with an oath.

"Who the devil's that?" he demanded.

The door was opened and a servant entered. He was already very nervous, and when he saw the revolver in the hand of the man to whom he was due to speak, he trembled.

"Well, fool?"

"Pardon, *mein Herr*, but I was asked to give you this," and he presented the copper disc.

After he had looked at the emblem of the Ronstadtian Secret Police, Greisner bellowed.

"Who gave you this?"

"A *herr* who came to the side door and said he had to see you, *mein Herr*. He seemed very impatient and angry and said that if I gave you that," pointing to the copper disc, "you would understand; he said it was his authority to see you."

"Where is he now?"

"He is waiting outside, *mein Herr*."

"Bring him in, fool!"

"Yes, *mein Herr*."

A minute later the man who had saved—at least, momentarily—Tiger Standish's life, walked into the room. He had a rosy face, and an authoritative manner.

"Rahusen!" exclaimed Greisner; "what the devil do you mean by this? And how did you get this disc?"

"I am here by the order of Signor Brassiano himself," was the reply. "These are his express instructions. The disc of the Secret Police belongs to the time when I worked for Ronstadt."

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed a voice; "what is a

bloke to do when he has so many enemies? How are you, Rahusen?"

The man with the rosy face turned to the speaker and smiled.

It was a horrible smile.

"I'm glad to see you're still alive, Standish," he replied; "I should have been disappointed otherwise."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY TELEPHONES

GREISNER went scarlet.

"Be good enough to confine your remarks to me," he replied stiffly; "this man," indicating Standish, "is no concern of yours."

"That is where I beg to differ," was the equally firm reply; "Mr. Standish is an old—a very old—adversary of mine, and if he is to be killed, as I am afraid must be the case, for he is a dangerous enemy of both our countries, then I must claim the honour."

"You cursed fool!" exploded Greisner; "do you dare to dictate to me? Where is your authority to be here at all?"

For reply, Rahusen pulled out a piece of paper which he held before his critic's eyes.

"That is my authority—and I think it will suffice," he said. "And, since you no doubt wish to know my reason for coming here so late to-night, I will explain that I have just received a further message from Signor Brassiano, ordering me to receive from you a full explanation of what he terms 'the abominable treachery' Ronstadt has endeavoured to play off against Caronia in making that pact with Solvania. . . . He knows, by the way, that I am here, so that should you attempt to do anything foolish . . . well, there might be very awkward complica-

tions: the Axis is already creaking badly; but suppose one of the wheels came off?"

The words sobered Greisner somewhat, but he quickly regained his former arrogance.

"The proper person to have come here for information was a duly-accredited official of the Caronian Embassy," he shot back.

"In the ordinary way, yes," he was informed, "but it happens that this is purely an Intelligence affair, as you yourself know very well."

"I have no power to tell you anything," was the answer, and Greisner turned to the envoy who had arrived from Menke in such peculiar circumstances that night.

"It is a matter for the Ambassador himself," stated the latter, speaking for the first time.

"Then I will see the Ambassador," remarked the visitor. Greisner stamped his foot.

"The Ambassador is in bed—such impertinence!" he cried.

The other remained unimpressed.

"I came here as the personal representative of Signor Brassiano. I suggest that it would be wise, perhaps, Herr Greisner, if you informed his Excellency that I wish to see him."

Greisner hesitated. A glance from the envoy persuaded him.

"Very well," he replied.

"And, meanwhile, I will have a little talk with Mr. Standish. I presume that it is entirely due to his becoming involved in this same affair that he is here with us? Well, he is a very capable secret agent as I know to my cost—the best in the British Intelligence Service; otherwise, I doubt if he would have penetrated my own identity."

"You should have got your plastic surgeon to change your ears, Rahusen," was the comment of the prisoner.

"Yes," was the slow reply, "a man's ears never change, however much his face may alter—I should have remembered that. However, it is not too late to stop further mischief being done. . . . Standish, our friend Carlimerio may be angry with me, because he had sworn to kill you

himself, but I cannot help that. In any case," picking up the revolver which Greisner had laid down when he had left the room, "a bullet kills quickly; you'll be lucky. . . ."

In a room at 10 Downing Street, the Prime Minister turned to the Foreign Secretary. Together they had been studying the contents of the leather satchel which Sir Harker Bellamy had brought to them half an hour before.

"But this is unspeakable," the Premier said in a tone so tense that it showed how deeply he was moved; "that a so-called civilised nation could even contemplate such a thing, let alone attempt to put it into action! Horrible! It makes one despair of mankind."

The Foreign Secretary nodded. Then he looked across at the third man in the room.

"How did Standish get this, Bellamy?" he asked.

"I have very few details yet, sir—and perhaps now I may never know."

"Why?"

"Because Standish himself was captured."

"Which means——?"

"That he is almost certainly a prisoner in the Ronstadtian Embassy."

The Foreign Secretary swung round in his chair.

"With your permission, Prime Minister, I intend to telephone the Ronstadtian Ambassador," he said.

The Crown's most important official gestured wearily. This final blow to his hopes for peace in Europe had left him too weary to reply.

The voice of Sir Ronald Waters, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, was polite but grim.

"Your Excellency," he said, "I apologise for troubling you at such a late hour, but I have just received reliable—very reliable—information to the effect that Herr Kuhnreich contemplates putting into effect a certain Plan. I will make no comment on this Plan except to say that it is revolting to the average civilised and normal mind in

the highest degree, and is the greatest barbarity that even modern Ronstadt has ever considered.

"I should explain that the Plan in all its details was brought to me through a member of the British Intelligence. His name is Standish, and I am given to understand that he is at present being held a prisoner at the Ronstadtian Embassy.

"Now, Your Excellency, I want you to understand that if Mr. Standish is not immediately released, the consequences will be most grave. In the first place, photostatic copies of all the documents in my possession will be issued to the Press of the world. The result must be overwhelming detestation and horror of the methods your Government contemplated using against this country. You will release Mr. Standish immediately? Thank you. I will send a car round to the Embassy at once. . . . No, I am afraid I can say nothing about the documents until I have consulted further with the Prime Minister and a special meeting of the Cabinet has been called."

He replaced the receiver.

"You may possibly have saved the Peace to-night, Waters," remarked the Prime Minister.

"I wouldn't bank on that, sir," was the comment of Sir Harker Bellamy; "and in any case, I'm thinking of Standish . . . may I go?"

The Prime Minister nodded.

"Bring him round here; I should like to thank him personally."

The door burst open.

"Don't shoot, you fool!" cried Greisner, and, rushing forward, he knocked up Rahusen's arm. The bullet, which had been intended for Tiger Standish's brain, buried itself in the ceiling.

"He is to be let go," went on Greisner; "it is the Ambassador's own orders."

Rahusen smiled.

"So, once again, the final settlement is postponed, Standish."

"Yes, old cock," was the answer, "and I do hope that

POSTSCRIPT

if you mess about with that mug of yours any more, you won't forget the ears. . . ."

Sonia, too happy now to bother about the past, laughed as she showed her husband a newspaper photograph.

"Who did you get to represent you at the Swifts match on Saturday?" she asked.

"Whilst I was very much otherwise engaged? Oh, that was Claud Ravenswood, the film star. Fortunately, he's much about my build, although Benny had to do a good deal of padding with his clothes, and the joke appealed to him. He seems to have done the job pretty well. Of course, if he had gone on the field . . ."

The invalid was interrupted by a weight suddenly falling on the bed. It had beautiful fur and it purred like a dynamo.

"Hello, rascal!" Tiger called.

Richard the Lion, the finest half-Persian in Mayfair, settled himself comfortably on the shoulder of the Man He Loved Best in all the World. He had been missing him lately.

POSTSCRIPT

Kuhnreich was alone. His favourite astrologer, who had faltered in his latest reading of the stars, had been angrily dismissed. What had the fool meant by mumbling something about the signs being unpropitious? How could the signs be unfavourable—wasn't he, Kurt Kuhnreich, the Man of Destiny, compared with whom Napoleon himself was but a bungler, master of his own fate?

Wasn't he waiting now for the word which would tell him that the Great Pestilence had already started in London? Within three days the greatest and richest city in the world would be a shambles beyond description. And the Plague would spread to every corner of Britain. That was the price the Prime Minister would have to pay for his refusal to

recognise that Ronstadt must, by reason of her outstanding virtues—due mainly to her pure Nordic strain of blood and consequent racial purity—become the dominant Power in all Europe.

And no one would know the truth! This Thing had been done in such secrecy: once they had got his cultures and formulae, Matthias, that stinking rat of a Jew, had been taken to Lieblenberg prison and shot.

His blood was on fire; he could not rest. The intoxicating visions that swept like Wagnerian music through his brain were driving him mad—mad with justified triumph.

Then characteristically he changed.

He felt depressed.

What could that cursed astrologer have meant?

He had to have reassurance.

Crossing the great room, he gave the Ronstadtian National Salute, paying homage to the bust of himself that rested on the huge mantelpiece.

As he did so, his eye caught a discoloration of the skin on the palm of the right hand.

It was a black spot.

THE END

